2021 FOOTBALL PREVIEW

The Picks **SB LVI** *CHIEFS over RAMS* **CFP CHAMPIONSHIP** *ALABAMA over CLEMSON*

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LEBRECHTMEDIA

SEPTEMBER 15, 2021
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Sports Illustrated

DAK PRESCOTT

You Have No Idea How the Dallas QB Arrived At This Moment

by GREG BISHOP

+

SI'S FBS TOP 20

Where's Your Team?

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NFL FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2021 CFB

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Under (hopefully) better circumstances, a familiar school is our pick to raise another trophy: Bama

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HALL OF (RELATIVE) FAME

Coming off perhaps its best season and armed with Heisman hopeful Breece Hall—he of 1,752 total yards and 23 TDs in '20—Iowa State will be right in the thick of the Big 12 title hunt.

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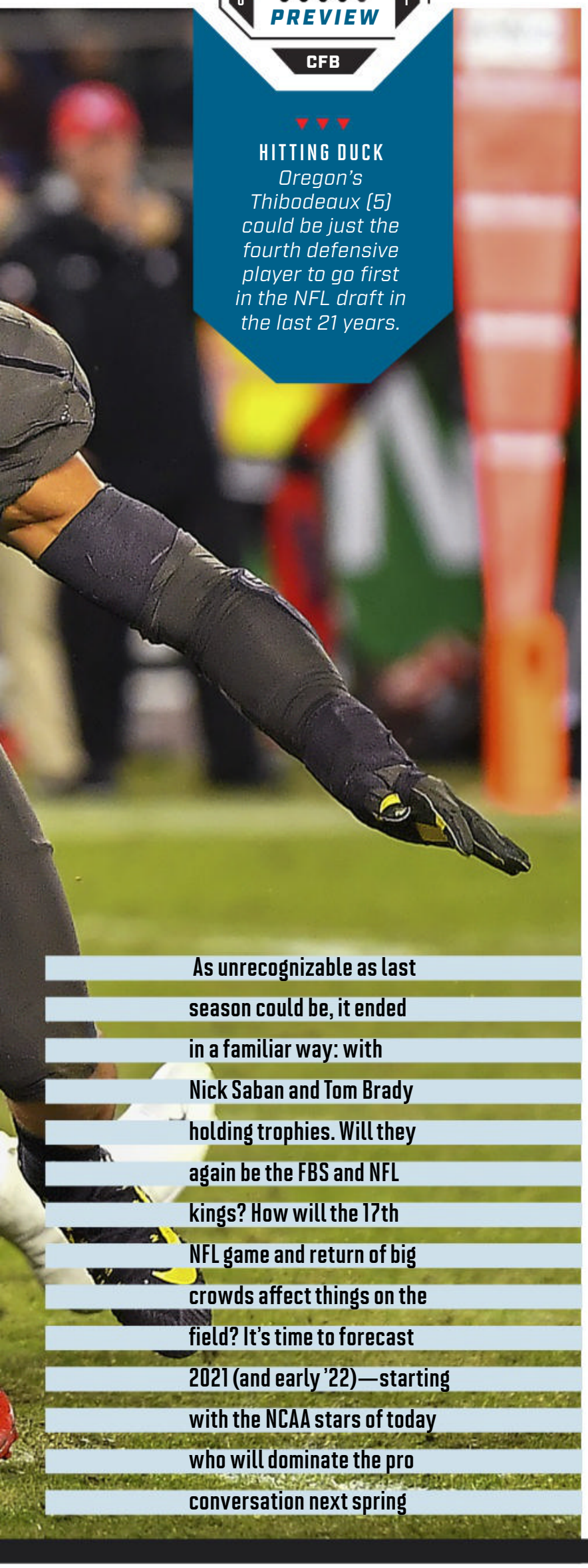
5-MINUTE GUIDE

NFL FOOTBALL PREVIEW CFB



HITTING DUCK

Oregon's Thibodeaux (5) could be just the fourth defensive player to go first in the NFL draft in the last 21 years.

As unrecognizable as last season could be, it ended in a familiar way: with Nick Saban and Tom Brady holding trophies. Will they again be the FBS and NFL kings? How will the 17th NFL game and return of big crowds affect things on the field? It's time to forecast 2021 (and early '22)—starting with the NCAA stars of today who will dominate the pro conversation next spring

2022

DRAFT TOP 10

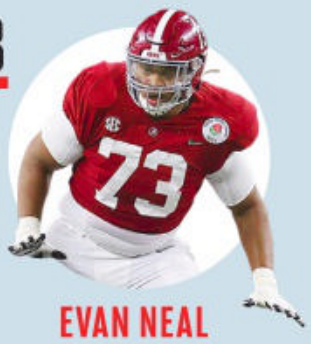
1

KAYVON THIBODEAUX
Oregon *edge*

2

DEREK STINGLEY JR.
LSU *cornerback*

3



EVAN NEAL
Alabama *offensive tackle*

4

DRAKE JACKSON
USC *edge*

5

KYLE HAMILTON
Notre Dame *safety*

6

KAIIR ELAM
Florida *cornerback*

7

KENYON GREEN
Texas A&M *offensive tackle*

8

SPENCER RATTLER
Oklahoma *quarterback*

9

TREYLON BURKS
Arkansas *wide receiver*

10

SAM HOWELL
North Carolina *quarterback*

ALIKA JENNER/GETTY IMAGES (THIBODEAUX ACTION); BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (THIBODEAUX DRAFT); JONATHAN BACHMAN/GETTY IMAGES (STINGLEY); KEVIN JAIRAJ/USA TODAY SPORTS (NEAL); CHRISTIAN PETERSEN/GETTY IMAGES (JACKSON); MARK ALBERTI/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (HAMILTON); GEORGE WALKER IV/TENNESSEAN.COM/USA TODAY NETWORK (ELAM); MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES (GREEN); GREG NELSON (RATTLER); WESLEY HITT/GETTY IMAGES (BURKS); JASEN VINLOVE/USA TODAY SPORTS (HOWELL)

MANAGING THE LOAD

The addition of a 17th regular-season game will put the pressure on players and training staffs

by CONOR ORR

5-MINUTE GUIDE

AROUND THE NFL, teams are trying anything and everything to keep their players on the field. There are massages and sensory deprivation. Epsom salt baths, infrared light guns and magnetic blood circulation machines. Trainers are tasked with stopping players on their way out of the facility to teach them box breathing exercises so that they can engage in more restorative sleep. All of this is designed to slow the physical toll of a sport that subjects participants to a series of high-speed collisions every week. And this year, for the first time, members of all 32 teams will face that treatment at least 17 times.

Teams that routinely make the playoffs, like the Patriots, have been playing 18- to 20-week seasons for more than a decade. Their rosters often endured multiple shape shifts throughout the course of a year to reflect the idea that anything beyond a standard 16-game slate is an ultramarathon that must be planned for expertly.

But what about a less fungible talent at a physically demanding position, like Titans RB Derrick Henry *(above, 22)* ? A 400-carry season used to be viewed as a kiss of death, causing a sharp decline in future production. Henry had 386 rushes in 2019 (including the playoffs, 18 games), then came back with 396 over 17 games in last year's Offensive Player of the Year campaign. With an increasing reliance on the star back, Henry will push 400 carries year in and year out before the postseason even arrives. One would hope Tennessee has a plan of rest for him. Remember, though, that we got the 17th game because this is a business. The Titans will probably just keep handing him the ball at this torrid rate until they can find his replacement. □

TREVOR RUSZKOWSKI/USA TODAY SPORTS

STIFF-ARM RACE

Who's getting the Heisman? Here's how SI's college football experts and the oddsmakers at SI Sportsbook see the race. Remember: It's been seven years since the preseason betting fave took the trophy

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SPENCER RATTLER OKLAHOMA QB	+500	**UIAGALELEI**	+700	**DESMOND RIDDER** CINCINNATI QB	n/a
BREECE HALL IOWA STATE RB	+3300	**BRYCE YOUNG** ALABAMA QB	+800	**CHRIS OLAVE** OHIO STATE WR	n/a
JT DANIELS GEORGIA QB	+1000	**DANIELS**	+1000	**ISAIAH SPILLER** TEXAS A&M RB	n/a
D.J. UIAGALELEI CLEMSON QB	+700	**HOWELL, CJ STROUD** OHIO ST QB	+1400	**KYLE HAMILTON** NOTRE DAME S	n/a

2021

NFL AWARD PREDICTIONS

MOST VALUABLE PLAYER

SI'S PICK

JOSH ALLEN
QB, BILLS

3 MORE CONTENDERS

Patrick Mahomes
QB, Chiefs

Justin Herbert
QB, Chargers

Aaron Rodgers
QB, Packers

BETTING FAVORITES

MAHOMES +450

RODGERS +900

ALLEN +1200

TOM BRADY
QB, Buccaneers
+1400

DEFENSIVE PLAYER OF THE YEAR

MYLES GARRETT
DE, BROWNS

3 MORE CONTENDERS

Aaron Donald
DT, Rams

T.J. Watt
OLB, Steelers

Joey Bosa
DE, Chargers

OFFENSIVE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

TREVOR LAWRENCE
QB, JAGUARS

3 MORE CONTENDERS

Trey Lance
QB, 49ers

Najee Harris
RB, Steelers

Kyle Pitts
TE, Falcons

DEFENSIVE ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

KWITY PAYE
DE, COLTS

3 MORE CONTENDERS

Micah Parsons
LB, Cowboys

Patrick Surtain II
CB, Broncos

Christian Barmore
DT, Patriots

ADAM HUNGER/GETTY IMAGES (TROPHY); DAVID E. KLUTHO (ALLEN, MAHOMES); JEFF LANGE/USA TODAY SPORTS (GARRETT); NATHAN RAY SEEBECK/USA TODAY SPORTS (LAWRENCE); ZACH BOLINGER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (PAYE)

HOMECOMING

Most NFL teams are expecting to have full stadiums—and the advantage they bring—once again

by GARY GRAMLING

5-MINUTE GUIDE

IT'S DIFFICULT to quantify the precise value of tens of thousands of similarly clad friends screaming *DE-FENSE* every time a visiting quarterback lines up for a snap. But, if last season was any indication, there is something to it.

In 2020, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, stadiums across the NFL had either no fans or limited capacity. The result was unprecedented: Road teams had a winning record (128-127-1) for the first time in NFL history and went 6–6 in the playoffs. That includes the Super Bowl champion Buccaneers, who finished 6–2 on the road during the regular season, then won three postseason games away before, oddly, becoming the first team to ever win a Super Bowl in its home stadium.

Penalties, long assumed to be one of the biggest benefits of the home crowd, whose decibel levels frazzle visiting teams into pre-snap flags, were hardly a factor. While road teams' accepted penalties (11.6 per game) were the second-fewest of the past 35 years (11.0 in 2008 was the lowest), flags per game were also down (22.5, second-lowest during that span).

No, the value of the home crowd seems to be something less tangible. Take Seattle's Lumen Field, regularly one of the loudest stadiums in the NFL. The Seahawks went 7–1 there during the regular season, despite the absence of their legion of "12s." But you couldn't help but feel that something was missing on wild-card weekend, when the team sleep-walked through a lopsided loss to the Rams, their shorthanded rivals, as the noise level rarely rose above ambient. Would Russell Wilson & Co. have fared better with a little energy from the crowd? The Seahawks hope to put that theory to the test before 72,000 fans in January. □

STEPHEN BRASHEAR/GETTY IMAGES

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DAK PRESCOTT
Dallas Cowboys
Quarterback

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SENIOR(CITIZEN)S

As COVID-19 wrought havoc in 2020, the NCAA granted players an extra season of eligibility. By sticking around, these five super seniors could well make an impact this fall

JAMES SKALSKI
CLEMSON LB

In his sixth year, Skalski would love a third straight title-game trip—and preferably to not be ejected, as he was in the previous two.

HASKELL GARRETT
OHIO STATE DT

With only four other defensive starters back, the Buckeyes will lean on Garrett, a preseason All-America who had four TFLs last season.

NICK STARKEL
SAN JOSE STATE QB

A grad transfer at his third school, Starkel led the Spartans to a conference title and their first appearance in the final AP poll since 2012.

TY FRYFOGLE
INDIANA WR

The first receiver in Big Ten history with back-to-back 200-yard games, Fryfogle averaged 19.5 yards per catch for IU's explosive attack.

COBY BRYANT
CINCINNATI CB

Named for the Mamba, Bryant was lethal to opposing receivers, tying for the conference lead with 11 passes defended.

UNIVERSAL/KOBAL/SHUTTERSTOCK (BELUSHI); BOB DONNAN/USA TODAY SPORTS (SKALSKI); ROBIN ALAM/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (GARRETT); MARK J. REBILAS/USA TODAY SPORTS (STARKEL); JUSTIN CASTERLINE/GETTY IMAGES (FRYFOGLE); JOSEPH MAIORANA/USA TODAY SPORTS (BRYANT); RUSSELL HONS/CSM/SHUTTERSTOCK (WATSON)

5-MINUTE GUIDE

2021

QUICK TURNAROUND

AFTER STAGING almost all of its 2020 season in the spring of '21, FCS is back to its normal calendar. Also back to normal, from the looks of things, are the fortunes of North Dakota State. On the heels of two perfect seasons, the Bison, who lost QB Trey Lance to the NFL, had their 39-game winning streak snapped, finishing with three losses and a playoff exit in the quarterfinals.

But third-year coach Matt Entz would seem to be stacked this season. The most intriguing talent is receiver Christian Watson *(right)*, a big-play specialist (23.3 yards per catch) who could be the first FCS player called at the 2022 draft. □

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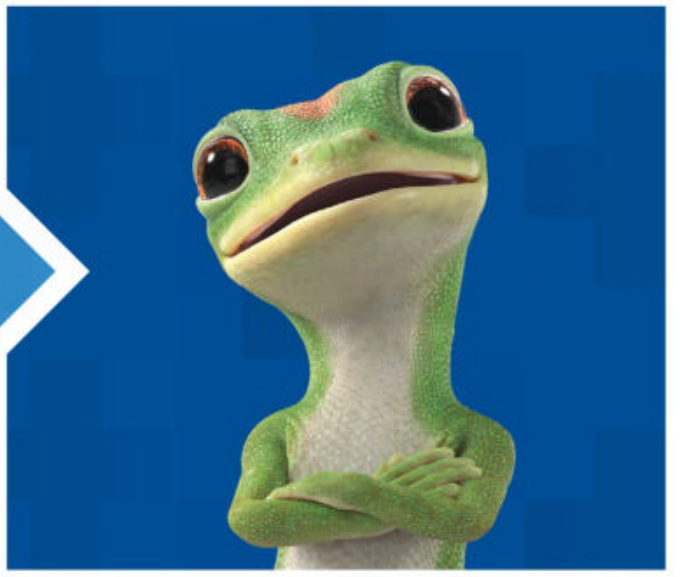

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Under building stress and anxiety, after a year that included his brother's suicide and a career-altering injury, ***DAK PRESCOTT*** found a way to cope—and to come out stronger than before

HEAL

TURN

by GREG BISHOP

photograph by LEBRECHTMEDIA

NFL FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2021 CFB

COME TO PASS
At the time of his injury, Prescott was leading the NFL in yards passing.

Dak Prescott rises from the wooden table in his kitchen. It's June, and he's standing at a pivot point—far enough past the worst stretch to look back but not that removed, either. He strolls down the hallway to his office, returning with a single sheet of notebook paper that he saved for more than a year but has shown to only his girlfriend. The words are blue, the handwriting tidy.

DAK PRESCOTT

Jace Mackenzie Prescott
A life taken to save millions.
You'll never be forgotten for one second.
-Why didn't you ask me for help?
-Did you tell someone how bad you hurting?
-Do you know how many people you affected?
-Do you know you're adored, admired, loved?

Prescott wrote those sentences on April 23, 2020, the day he'll always remember but would give anything to forget. The night before, after weeks filled with anxiety and depression, not to mention a contract saga that dragged on without end, he slept soundly for the first time in forever. He woke up after 8 a.m. to his father and friends standing in his bedroom with red eyes and anguished faces. His phone looked like a slot machine, pinging and flashing with hundreds of missed calls and unanswered texts.

A few hours earlier, 300 miles away, Dak's uncle, Phillip Ebarb, had been awoken by a police officer in the middle of the night. The cop said, "I'm here to inform you that your nephew, Jace Prescott, is deceased."

"What are you talking about?" Ebarb asked. "What do you mean?"

"He took his own life."

Ebarb screamed, then collapsed. He drifted through the next few hours as if living in someone else's nightmare. He had to call Jace's girlfriend, who was waiting outside the hospital, believing her boyfriend was still alive. He had shot himself at their apartment and died soon after.

Dak needed to escape the bedroom and those anguished, tear-streaked faces. He went outside, by the pool, and when he looked up, he no longer saw the "dark cloud" that had hovered over him. Instead, the sun was blinding. He couldn't think. He bolted back inside to write the letter, 15 minutes after he found out.

His oldest brother, Tad, immediately flew from Lake Charles, La., to Dallas. But upon arriving at Dak's home, Tad lingered outside, blaming himself, smoking a cigarette, unable to walk in. When Dak found him out there, Tad could only say, "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize," Dak told him.

So they started telling stories, looking back, attempting to make sense of what did not and probably never will. Introversion was Jace's default setting. He didn't talk much about his feelings. Dak had checked on him about a week earlier. "This is my life," Jace responded.

TOM PENNINGTON/GETTY IMAGES

COWBOYS
EST. 1960
91

"WHAT I'VE BEEN THROUGH, I'LL CALL IT A *CALLUSED MIND*," PRESCOTT SAYS, DESCRIBING HIS BROKEN ANKLE AS "JUST ANOTHER SCRATCH THAT'LL HEAL UP, THAT'LL MAKE ME STRONGER."

Dak's thoughts spun in a thousand different directions. To Nathaniel, his father, who had to tell him his mom died in 2013, meaning Nat had delivered the worst possible news twice. To Tad, whose last promise to his dying mother was that he would care for his younger brothers, always; who had forgotten to message Jace to meet up that April and would be haunted by the text that slipped his mind. And to Jace, not only for the life they shared but also for what had now become unfathomably clear—what they didn't.

Even then, something unexpected happened. Deep into his worst 18 months ever—those miserable, universe-questioning, transformative months—Dak gleaned important wisdom that he would carry into the 2021 season. Just thinking about others, their pain, helped him to deal with his own.

FOURTEEN MONTHS after that terrible day, Prescott arrives early at a cigar bar near the Cowboys' headquarters in Frisco, Texas. He's alone—no entourage, no reps. Early into a nearly three-hour sitdown, he grabs a legal pad and begins to draw the first and most important home field of his life. He sketches the sliver of a yard in northeast Louisiana; draws his older brothers' bedrooms; outlines the living room/bar/kitchen and the room he shared with his mother, Peggy. His eyes dance as he scrawls, the memories returning. Someone put a hole in that wall trying to kill a spider with a hammer. There were scratches all over that door from a few thousand Nerf dunks.

Long before fame, even before football, Prescott absorbed an important concept in that single-wide trailer. He can summarize it in one word: manifesting.

For a household that moved around and spent more than a few nights without any home at all, the trailer park and all the fields nearby made up the only world they ever needed. The one they could create themselves.

Even in a family that turned competing into "almost an illness," the boys' aunt/nanny, Valrie Gilbeaux, says the youngest one stood out. For what he wanted. For how his brain worked. Prescott watched the movie *Little Giants*, relating to one scene where players reminisced about times they had beaten their brothers. Because that's exactly what he had wanted since the day Jace handed him a football and said, "Throw."

He was the dreamer in the family, the one who manifested reality before any sport psychologist deployed that term. He alternately predicted his future as a movie star, football All-Pro or president of the United States.

"Everything in my life [that happened], I've constantly thought about," he says. "Of saying things, believing things, working, then watching them come to fruition."

He wasn't like the other children. He didn't want a picture with or an autograph from a famous athlete, because he expected to become one. He kept a Matchbox car, an El Camino, for the day he would drive the real thing. Yet, when Tad complained of the endless rotation of the same meals—chicken, meatloaf, spaghetti—Dak looked at him earnestly and, despite being younger by six years, said, "Bro, I'm just grateful we got something to eat."

His sophomore year at Mississippi State, he

TIM HEITMAN/USA TODAY SPORTS

showed up at the football facility at 6 a.m. the day before his mom died, telling coaches he must play that afternoon—to sort through his loss, to give meaning to her death. These older men stared back at him, trying to understand how someone could be 20 and 40 at the same time.

Ebarb would take his youngest nephew fishing around then. He wanted to gauge Dak's mental state in the best way they know how: out on the water, phones shelved. They stopped at a small store in a small town to purchase fishing licenses. Dak laughed and told jokes.

As they strolled back into the parking lot, four women followed them outside. They wanted to take a picture with Mr. Charming. Ebarb snapped away before they asked him an odd question. *Who, exactly, was his nephew?*

"He just projects that vibe," Uncle Phil says, "that he's somebody."

Ebarb knows exactly where that comes from: "When you have decided what you're going to be your whole life, it's just who you are."

His nephew now lives in North Dallas, on grounds so expansive they could fit a small trailer park in the backyard. His estate—pool, football field, pond, golf green, fishing creek—unspools over seven acres, because that's the exact size he dreamed of as a child. There's an El Camino parked in the garage. It's near the Ferrari with the personalized license plate spelling out SINGLE WIDE.

Everything from the layout of the property to the activities Dak partakes in speaks to the duality he created. He took the place he loved the most and made himself a larger, fancier, upgraded version. In some ways, everything is different now; in others, nothing is.

He laughs. The mind sure is a funny place.

ANDREW DIEB/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

AS PRESCOTT ascended throughout his 2016 rookie season, his rise struck many as improbable. But not him. He expected to become one of the NFL's top quarterbacks, to change the minds who doubted him.

In four seasons, he manifested a new reality, becoming the most important player on the highest-valued team in the U.S.'s most popular sport. But that climb created a first-world problem. To retain his services and push to end a championship drought that now stretched over two unacceptable decades, Cowboys owner Jerry Jones needed to pay the face of his

DAK PRESCOTT

▼▼▼

BAD BREAK
Following a routine tackle (left), an emotional Prescott was carted off (above).

DAK

PRESCOTT

▼▼▼

PAST AND PRESENTS

The Prescott brothers (left to right): Jace, Dak and Tad.

$5.5 billion franchise the kind of massive contract that either launches teams or ruins them.

As negotiations dragged on, the worst thing that could have happened on the field played out. On Oct. 11, 2020, Prescott started his day in a hotel room, bused to the stadium, then watched from the locker room as his friend Alex Smith completed the most remarkable comeback in NFL history. Smith had jogged back onto the field for Washington almost two years after nearly losing his leg from infections that followed a gruesome on-field break. "I got chills," Prescott says.

Fast forward a few hours. Cowboys-Giants. Third quarter. Prescott went down on a routine tackle by Logan Ryan. He thought he rolled an ankle. He leaned over and saw his right leg bent sideways, the ankle pointing outward. He heard his mom in that instant, imploring him to get up because that's how she would know he wasn't hurt. He tried to bang the ankle back into place, realized he coudn't stand and waved frantically at the sideline, as Smith prayed from afar and Jones grimaced in the owner's box.

A friend had told him years earlier that in times of crisis he should thank God over and over. So as the broadcast team screamed "oh no" . . . *thank you, God* . . . as doctors rushed onto the field . . . *thank you, God* . . . as teammates patted Prescott on the helmet . . . *thank you, God* . . . as the cart drove him away . . . *thank you, God* . . . as he buried his tears in a towel . . . *thank you, God*. "That was my peace in all this," Prescott says.

The processing began as soon as the cart sped off. Prescott was honest with himself immediately: His season was over; no need to raise false hope. That's why the tears ran from his eyes in streams, why he covered his face with a towel. Then, forward. He watched the rest of the Cowboys' victory on his phone in the ambulance. He sent a congratulatory message to Andy Dalton, the quarterback who had replaced him. He texted Gilbeaux, the aunt he had spied in a tunnel at the stadium, telling her, "Quit crying; I will be fine. It will be fine."

Doctors delivered a diagnosis that suggested otherwise: a compound fracture and a dislocation. Because of the type of injury and severity, his break forced an obvious comparison to Smith's extensive damage.

Tad was upset, and not just about the end of a promising season, but because he had urged Dak to sit out the first six games to make a point in negotiations and remain at full health. "It's not like I'm gonna get hurt," Dak had told him.

The Cowboys, depleted by injuries and without their star quarterback, would limp through a 6–10 campaign. First, Dak woke up in the hospital. Tad's thoughts ping-ponged. He knew Dak had overcome far worse, especially that past April. But he also worried the injury might change the Cowboys' plans.

Not Dak. "What I've been through, I'll call it a *callused mind*," he says, describing a broken ankle as "just another scratch that'll heal up, that'll make me stronger." In the months that followed he would sometimes pull up the video of that hit late at night and cringe. But as a nurse wheeled him out of surgery, toward anxious friends and family, Prescott said only two words.

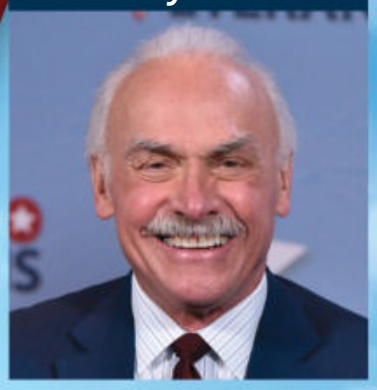
They spoke, as always, to his mindset.

"What's next?"

BACK IN the cigar lounge, for the first time in over an hour, Prescott pays cursory attention to the bank of TVs on the opposite wall. Tennis star Naomi Osaka is on the screens. She had withdrawn from the

COURTESY OF PRESCOTT FAMILY

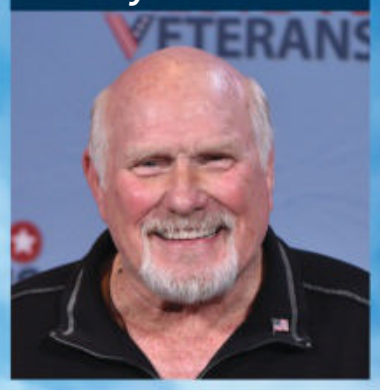
SALUTE TO VETERANS



★ Rocky Bleier ★

U.S. Army Veteran,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

U.S.ARMY



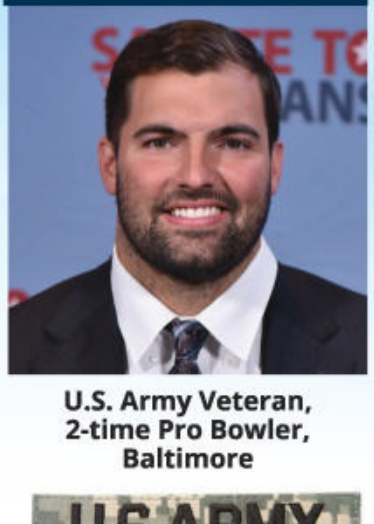
★ Terry Bradshaw ★

TV Host & Hall of Famer,
4-time Champion,
Pittsburgh

★ Greg Gadson ★

U.S. Army Veteran,
Honorary Captain,
2-time Champion, New York

U.S.ARMY



★ Alejandro Villanueva ★

U.S. Army Veteran,
2-time Pro Bowler,
Baltimore

U.S.ARMY

★ Joe Cardona ★

U.S. Navy Veteran,
2-time Champion,
New England

U.S. NAVY

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PRESCOTT

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4-WHEEL DRIVE

Dak (right) and Tad enjoy an estate that only Dak could imagine when they were kids.

French Open a few days earlier, citing concern for her mental health. To Prescott, her struggle shows that the mind is more than a funny place. It's also a delicate one.

The quarterback says he never grappled with his psyche—until he did. He remembers looking at others and thinking, "What the hell are you stressed about?" He didn't understand stress on a baseline level, like, as a concept. But that changed in 2018.

Despite a playoff and Pro Bowl season, Prescott spent too much time in the worst place on Earth for anyone who wants to feel decent about themselves: Twitter. Outside perceptions began to bother him, and football—really, everything around it—"started getting a little hard."

He deleted the app from his phone, allowing others to run it for him. But it wasn't just Twitter; it was everything around football, from celebrity to fame to expectations to outside noise.

Prescott had already met twice with a therapist, who taught him to vent about what bothered him. He needed to in 2018, and often would to Jace, especially as it related to the perception of the contract. To be clear: It wasn't an issue in the locker room. The base salary—$2.7 million over four years—didn't offend him, either. His annoyance instead centered on how the endless conversation around it affected his off-field focus. He wanted to tunnel into football and let his representatives handle negotiations. But everywhere he went, every news conference he attended, every round of golf he played, every stranger he bumped into—everyone wondered the same thing, for the better part of *three years*. "Do y'all want me to go crazy?" he sometimes thought, as pundits and strangers, outsiders all, "created a lot of false narratives for who I am and how I think."

How Dak shapes his thinking is the most relatable thing about him. He's an avid Google searcher, with no rabbit hole too deep, no topic too far-fetched. In recent months, he looked into the plight of Dallas's homeless population, Mississippi State's national champion baseball team and incoming football recruits.

These dives speak to a mind that's always racing, probing, thinking. But during the pandemic in 2020, the same endless curiosity started to birth adverse effects. With a more typical, physical injury, there would be goals, day-to-day improvement, therapy, people to lean on, in-person conversations to be had. The pandemic was not that, nor something he could control. He worried about his family contracting COVID-19 and his life as anything other than the Cowboys' quarterback. He says he doesn't believe the contract situation factored into his growing apprehension, but it's certainly

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possible that it did, even on a subconscious level.

"So much anxiety built depression," he says, before laying out his thought process. *Well, now I'm sad. Now, I'm upset. Now, I've got these thoughts of: What's going to happen to me? What legacy do I have? Who am I if I'm just in this room?*

Truth is, he had already been anxious. Before the pandemic Prescott took a trip to California, renting a place in Newport Beach down the street from Kobe Bryant. In his youth, Prescott had rooted against the legend; over time, he came to idolize the man instead. One night, they both went to dinner, separately, at a nearby steakhouse. Someone asked whether Prescott wanted an introduction. He declined, figuring that Bryant was busy entertaining his own guests, assuming they'd meet eventually.

A week later Prescott's girlfriend, Natalie Buffett, gasped and handed him her phone. Bryant had died in a helicopter crash. As the couple rode to the airport, they passed by the residence, with dozens of news crews stationed outside a gate lined with balloons, flowers and sympathy cards. Prescott felt a surge of anxiety in that moment, because he saw Bryant as powerful, invincible, young. "It just showed me how close death is," he says. "That nobody's safe and all of us have a ticket out, and that's the reality of this world."

Prescott loved his seven acres but started to feel confined there, the sprawling estate more like a cell than any trailer, before his brother died. He's "almost embarrassed" to say that, knowing many had it so much worse. But that didn't change how it felt when he couldn't get out of bed, leave his room or pick up his phone. "Like I was in a box, and I couldn't get out of the box," he says. "It felt like sunny days were dark."

Through Bryant's death and the start of the pandemic, Prescott did not speak with another counselor. But he did reach out to family members: specifically, his brothers. It was Jace, his "big ol' teddy bear," who responded first. "I'm here for you," he tapped back.

JACE HAD lived with their mother at the end, watching the cancer wreak its devastation, every day a little worse. He saw her take her last breath. Maybe he worried he had disappointed her, because of what many projected him to be: a star who would play in the NFL. But Jace suffered, too, in part because of the sport he loved. He told relatives that when he fell on one middle school opponent, he could hear the poor kid's bone snap. He shattered his own wrist, suffered other injuries and didn't finish college. "Not long after that, [she] passed," Tad says. The trauma continued piling up. "Just stacks and stacks and stacks."

Dak never expected any positives would come from his brother's death. He didn't want any. But in many ways, if he's being honest, he believes it steeled him. Losing Jace gave him gifts, like clarity, the ability to sort through his emotions and sort out his future.

That lucidity helped Prescott map out and maximize his time away. He told doctors he didn't want to put a timetable on his recovery, because he planned to do as much as possible each day and didn't want an arbitrary deadline he would inevitably try to beat. "I didn't care what they said, honestly," he insists, which is exactly what his aunt remembers his mother saying after the cancer diagnosis.

With no football to play and up to 12 hours a day when his still-healing leg needed to be elevated, Prescott considered himself in a more holistic way. He still had trouble sleeping, which meant more Google searches: deep dives on nutrition that led him to cut out fast food, for instance. He also read more, gleaning recommendations from coaches, teammates and an unexpected source—Ryan, the opponent whose tackle had injured him.

The defensive back sent a handwritten letter and two books that helped him recover from his own season-ending injury (a broken leg) years earlier: *Relentless*, by Tim Grover, who had trained Bryant and Michael Jordan; and Bryant's *The Mamba Mentality*. The Cowboys' mental coach, Chad Bohling, introduced Prescott to other clients, like Derek Jeter. The Yankees great told the

"IT'S AMAZING THAT I GOT HURT AND BEFORE I EVER GOT ON THE FIELD AGAIN, I WAS REWARDED," PRESCOTT SAYS.

SCOTT GALVIN/USA TODAY SPORTS

quarterback that he had hurried to overcome an ankle injury and wasn't in full health when he returned. *Don't rush back*, Jeter counseled.

Prescott graduated from crutches to a boot, walking to running—mundane steps he viewed as small injections of "joy," because he had chosen to look at them that way. Using the same thought process, he elected to undergo a second surgery, to stabilize the ankle and avoid another procedure in later years. Sure, this pushed his recovery out a couple of weeks. But he elected to see it as potentially gaining back months in a later offseason.

He started playing golf more because he liked the solitude, the way he competed against only himself. He took up tennis for the same reason, because "you think it's you vs. the other person,

BY CONOR ORR

HAPPY RETURNS

Prescott is just one of the handful of NFL stars looking to bounce back after major injury

JOE BURROW
The No. 1 pick from 2020, the Bengals' signal-caller began last year as the pacesetter for Offensive Rookie of the Year honors before sustaining a horrific knee injury in Week 11. He has admitted to struggling mentally during training camp, looking uncomfortable when defenders got too close to his rehabbed left knee. It signified just how important it will be for Cincinnati to get improved play from the offensive line in front of him.

ODELL BECKHAM JR.
The Browns' playmaking wide receiver *(left)* has always come with a caveat: His incredible speed and athleticism sometimes leave him prone to soft-tissue injuries. In 2020 that meant an ACL tear in Week 7—he's now missed 25 games over the last four seasons. The Browns made the playoffs without him, but this offense will be incredibly hard to gameplan for if Beckham is healthy.

NICK BOSA
Bosa's season-ending knee injury in Week 2 killed any chance for the 2019 Defensive Rookie of the Year to follow up on a transcendent season. His return is vital to a 49ers' scheme that relies on versatile pass rushers who can line up virtually anywhere on the defensive front. His 25 quarterback hits in 2019 helped San Francisco plow its way through the NFC and into the Super Bowl (and helped earn his defensive coordinator, Robert Saleh, a head-coaching gig with the Jets two seasons later).

SAQUON BARKLEY
The Giants back's otherworldly athleticism has never been fully displayed in the NFL, as the No. 2 pick of the 2018 draft has been stuck behind an underwhelming offensive line and constrained by a limited scheme. He tore his ACL in Week 2 of the 2020 season and has rehabbed cautiously. He represents the fragility of New York's rebuild; if he can return to form, the Giants can overpower smaller defenses behind the ground game. If his knee issue lingers, they will struggle again as a pass-dependent unit.

DAK

PRESCOTT

and it's not. It's you vs. the net, you vs. the backline." These, too, were mental reps.

For months this practice extended way beyond football. Prescott devoted extra time to numerous off-field causes: raising money for a cancer research grant in his mother's honor, donating $1 million to police training, partnering with three mental health organizations, sponsoring after-school programs. He donated a thousand meals for homeless people. He also wrote to politicians on behalf of a man in prison, Julius Jones, who he believed was wrongfully incarcerated for murder.

Ultimately, Prescott does not consider his 2020 season "lost." He believes surviving the physical and mental gantlet will allow him to play for another 15, 20 years, if he desires and can stay healthy. His mindset was reinforced by a random interaction in a restaurant, when a little girl approached his table and asked whether she could show him a picture. On her phone, there was a cute chihuahua with legs turned outward like Prescott's on the day of his injury. She had fostered the puppy because of him. "His feet are on backward just like yours were," she said. Her thought process, the framework especially, stunned him. He knew then something else: The mind is a funny and delicate place—but also a beautiful one.

▼ ▼ ▼

SUMMER CAMP

A shoulder injury has complicated practices, but Prescott was thankful to be under center.

ON THE DAY of that injury, despite the nausea and the headache, Jones rushed to the locker room to see Prescott before he left for the hospital. The owner wanted to hug him, to tell him they'd get through it. But he had a more important point to convey first, even if he knew it best not to discuss figures: He needed Prescott to know the Cowboys still wanted to sign him.

The quarterback says he always expected to stay in Dallas, although it's easy—and practical—to say that now. But it's one thing to believe it and another to sign one of the richest deals in sports history, a notion highlighted by the machinations in negotiations. In 2019, before the Cowboys applied the franchise tag to Prescott, he and Jones left a scrimmage against the Rams in Hawaii believing they had all but agreed to terms. Troy Aikman, broadcasting the Cowboys' opener, was told signatures might be put to paper before kickoff. The sides simply ran out of time.

Still, Jones recognized the value in his quarterback. He cites the authenticity, the "human element" of Prescott's leadership, the mindfulness unlike any he has "ever seen."

"It's called makeup," Jones says. "At every step, he has over-delivered. I heard him talk about 'generational wealth.' He was always a generational thought in my mind [as a Dallas Cowboy]."

Still, Prescott ignored the delay as best he could. When Tad mentioned sitting out in 2020, Prescott said the franchise tag represented a $29 million raise beyond the endorsement income that already allowed for the seven acres and the Ferrari with the personalized plate. This was *at least we got something to eat* all over again.

Last February, Prescott and Buffett traveled to Park City, Utah, for a vacation. The quarterback doesn't ski, so he spent a week staring up at the mountains and into the fire. He felt something odd as the hours flew by. Maybe . . . *calm*?

Upon returning to Texas, he decided to check in with his agent. He instructed Todd France to text rather than call, but France instead buzzed a few hours later. "Do you love me?" he asked.

Eleven months after he lost his brother, five months after the ghastly injury, Prescott inked a four-year extension worth up to $160 million. The more relevant numbers—$126 million guaranteed, $66 million to sign—signified how much the Cowboys valued him.

JASON PARKHURST/USA TODAY SPORTS

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2021 VISION

With contract in hand, Prescott is looking to end a 25-year Super Bowl drought.

The night he signed, rather than plan a massive celebration, Prescott and Buffett went to an already-scheduled dinner. He can't remember whether anyone made a toast. But she remembers walking in, and every other diner standing up, delivering the man from the single-wide trailer a standing ovation. "It's amazing that I got hurt and before I ever got on the field again, I was rewarded," Prescott says. "But that plays a big part in the things I've manifested." After he tells that story, he points to the scar that runs for about six inches across his right ankle, forming a wishbone after the second surgery. Same word: mindset.

AT THE CIGAR bar in June, Prescott presents the antithesis of a football star all but guaranteed nine figures in career earnings. He's dressed in shorts and a T-shirt, slip-on shoe covering the scar, nothing fancy, no obnoxious branding. He's early and alone. He heads to the back room, which is empty, and reclines on a black leather couch.

At that moment, the wall of TVs is tuned to *NFL Live*. The analysts are debating Dak Prescott; specifically, whether he's ready for the magnitude of what's in front of him. Briefly, it's like he's trapped in a hall of mirrors. That's his face, his highlights, on something like 20 screens.

Ankle healed, mind fortified, Prescott returned this spring, everything different and nothing changed. "There's no way to put into words the fact that, yeah, the last time I was out there, I got my leg snapped, and there was a lot of uncertainty in the world," he says. Now, "when you're doing so much, just being intentional and purposeful, it's amazing to get to do what you love to do again."

Prescott follows that with a promise: "I'm going to be a better player in every aspect. The things that have happened, they've allowed me to be here, but I don't even know if I've reaped the strength yet. What I mean is . . . that's to come."

Still, this isn't a fairy tale. Not yet, anyway. As soon as Prescott finished practice, he received a call about his father, whose blood pressure had elevated, requiring paramedics to stop by and check on him. Then Buffett was in a car accident. (Both would be fine.) But he didn't allow his anxiety to build. He will write his story. He alone could choose how to respond.

Prescott summoned those same vibes during training camp, when he did not throw for weeks due to a shoulder injury. He reminded himself of Jeter's advice. He also watched motivational videos sent by an assistant coach every morning at 5. One line in particular resonated: *The patient man is the wealthiest one*.

The patient man is now a mental health advocate. In a sense, he's reluctant—he feels guilty because of why he has become that, because his brother died, and no amount of awareness raised or lives saved will bring him back. That's what Prescott means when he says he has "credibility in this" now. But at the same time, there's not an ounce of reluctance—"a life taken to save millions," one more accomplishment to manifest.

The twist: What Prescott most wants will no longer define him. Not in sum. The twist on top of that: Because Prescott refuses to be reduced to one-or-the-other arguments—Super Bowl champion or failure—he's more likely to win.

The talking heads define Prescott in binary terms: good enough or not, franchise quarterback or not. He ignores that exercise, looking away, never to look back. Inside the lounge, he lights an Aniversario Perfecto. He takes a puff and asks the waitress to mute the televisions.

"Perspective," he says, "has become my greatest strength." □

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TO THE FUTURE

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NFL FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2021 CFB

With NFL offenses turning to power runs more often, defenses that were built for a pass-happy game are rediscovering the need for *ELITE LINEBACKERS* with a tandem of Bucs leading the way

RS

TAMPA TWO
White (left) and David dominated in coverage and danced all the way to a Super Bowl win.

by CONOR ORR

TODD BOWLES seldom breaks character, but when he does, his wit is almost artful. To hear it from Buccaneers players, the juxtaposition between the 57-year-old defensive coordinator's usually stoic demeanor and his situationally droll one-liners explains why his jokes tend to land so well.

Veteran linebacker Lavonte David is a frequent target. He once bragged to Bowles that he possessed supreme pass-catching skills, but after his second dropped interception last season Bowles began the next meeting by casually asking the former Pro Bowler: "You need to borrow my hands today?"

"Lavonte said he had 'hands like Allstate,' " Bowles recalls, referencing the omnipresent ad campaign based around those ever-reliable, open palms. "I come to find out he needs the insurance himself."

Like the best jokes, there lies an implied truth here. Bowles expects that his linebackers David, 31; and his 23-year-old partner on the second level, Devin White; are capable of catching the football. That's in addition to covering tight ends, running backs and wide receivers just as well as Bowles himself did during his time as an NFL defensive back in the 1980s. When the trio first started working together two years ago, Bowles laid out his expectations. Simply put: "Blitz and cover, blitz and cover, blitz and cover"

LINEBACKER REVIVAL

WAIT IN LBS

After failing to make the postseason his first eight years, David shined in Super Bowl LV.

(while, obviously, maintaining the physicality necessary to stop the run).

Since then, David and White have blitzed, covered and tackled as well as any linebacker duo in the NFL. And the result has been a Super Bowl–winning defense with the ability to do what so many coordinators across the league can only wish for: keep multiple linebackers on the field to defend against the run, while not becoming susceptible to passing-game mismatches. So often in today's NFL, linebackers are targeted by opponents whose passing plays force them to cover faster receivers. Offenses tend to use a no-huddle, hurry-up approach when the defense—unable to substitute between plays—is "stuck" with multiple linebackers on the field. Tampa Bay has the antidote.

"When the other team goes no-huddle, I already have two guys [on the field] in there that can play," says Bowles, speaking of David and White, the only linebacking duo who each played at least 93% of their unit's snaps in 2020.

Tampa Bay's success since hiring Bowles and drafting White fifth in 2019, to pair with David, has raised antennae and shifted aspirations across the league. At the 2020 draft, the number of off-ball linebackers, like David and White (as opposed to stand-up edge rushers, who are often considered outside linebackers but play a different role), drafted in the first round doubled from the year before. After the Bucs' win over the Chiefs in Super Bowl LV in February, the Cardinals, Cowboys and Washington each added off-ball linebackers in the first round, hoping to create a dynamic similar to what Bowles has in Tampa Bay.

David sees it: His position is experiencing a bit of a renaissance. Inside linebackers are getting their due, too, with earnings more in line with edge rushers (whose splashy deals have typically reflected their generating of sacks and quarterback pressures). The Colts recently made Darius Leonard the highest-paid inside linebacker in NFL history, with a contract that averages $19.7 million per season. And that only barely eclipsed the $19 million per season

MARK J. REBILAS/USA TODAY SPORTS

that the 49ers committed to Fred Warner a few weeks earlier. (For perspective, both deals rank among the 15 highest for any defensive player.) In March, David signed his own two-year, $25 million contract extension, which is significant for an inside linebacker in his early 30s. And Bowles, for good measure, in August accepted a three-year extension (one year longer than most coordinator contracts) that will make him the highest-paid defensive coordinator in football.

But the real story of this linebacking renaissance is, like any other evolution in the NFL, a matter of expert timing and keen resource-mining. Teams that quickly followed Bowles and the Bucs will be prepared for what is happening now and well into the near future.

"People were starting to devalue the position," David says. "We put respect back on the linebacker. [Coaches] are trying to take us off the field on certain downs, but when you have guys like me and Devin, that just raises our value. We're upholding the position."

OVER THE past two decades, as rule changes prompted an explosion in the passing game, general managers and defensive coaches reacted the way one might expect: They overdrafted and oversigned stud defensive backs to compensate for the myriad ways in which their secondaries were being carved up.

And because there are only so many ways to build a roster under the salary cap, that influx of investment in defensive backs had to come at the expense of some other position. Defenses were running more nickel and dime formations (personnel groupings with five or six defensive backs, respectively), and they often siphoned resources from the linebackers' room to do so, since linebackers suddenly weren't playing as much.

In response, some offenses in recent years began to capitalize on the fact that their opponents were critically overmatched from a run-defense standpoint. These teams began deploying heavier formations—using a second tight end or a fullback instead of a third receiver—which forced defenses to put two or three linebackers (from that same depleted position group) back on the field more frequently.

The latest in a series of chess moves raised two major issues for defenses.

• The third off-ball linebacker on a given team was often one of the worst players on the roster. Most defenses were much deeper in quality defensive backs. A defensive coordinator couldn't put his best 11-man lineup on the field.

• Defenses became so used to playing in pass-oriented sets that they prepared fewer play calls for linebacker-heavy personnel groupings. They weren't just physically overmatched—they'd also become predictable.

"Common sense: If every defense in the league starts going light, starts playing dime and nickel for the bulk of the snaps; at some point [offenses] are going to line up and power you," says one AFC personnel man. "You need someone to stop the bleeding—guys who can match that physicality and strength."

The advantage of enticing a defense into playing its third linebacker instead of its fifth defensive back might seem thin, but it can net massive gains for an opponent, and it has fueled offenses in Baltimore, Green Bay, New England, San Francisco and Tennessee, among others. Despite differences at quarterback and in offensive scheme, those teams all thrive by forcing opponents into linebacker-heavy sets.

This all works to accentuate versatile inside linebackers such as David and White, who, according to NFL Game Statistics and Information System, last season saved the Bucs 467.4 total rushing yards and 483.3 total passing yards by virtue of being on the field. (That stat, called "net yards over average," calculates a player's value on a per-play basis, measured against a league-average player at the position.) David, specifically, has been the gold standard for coverage among his peers; according to NFL Next Gen Stats, he has the third-highest coverage-success rate since 2019, the fourth-best yards per target allowed and the second-best yards after catch per reception allowed.

"There is a lot of [offensive] variety in the league right now," says Jets coach Robert Saleh, the longtime defensive coach who served as coordinator of the 49ers' D the past four seasons. "And you have to be able to handle *all* of it."

Saleh says he was fortunate in recent years to practice against San Francisco coach Kyle Shanahan, who was early to the trend of

"WE PUT RESPECT BACK ON THE LINEBACKER," SAYS DAVID. "WHEN YOU HAVE GUYS LIKE ME AND DEVIN, THAT JUST RAISES OUR VALUE. WE'RE UPHOLDING THE POSITION."

“WHEN THE OTHER TEAM GOES NO-HUDDLE, I ALREADY HAVE TWO GUYS [ON THE FIELD] THAT CAN PLAY,” SAYS BOWLES.

▼ ▼ ▼

SUPER BOWLES
The defensive coordinator’s deployment of his linebackers has made the Bucs’ defense elite.

manipulating opposing defenses for the sake of exposing shoddy linebacker play. He has seen the breadth of tricks up close, and he can counter schematically—but absent a linebacker with the duality of David and White, that scheming could ultimately end up fruitless.

The long-term availability of those types of players remains to be seen. One AFC personnel man, for example, observes that most linebackers coming out of college have range “from sideline to sideline,” an NFL platitude reserved for players with adequate lateral speed. (The nature of the college game, which now sees plenty of tight ends who can run 4.4 40-yard dashes, has forced the position to adapt.) But the search grows complicated from there. Can that same player shed a block and get a 220-pound runner to the ground? Can he stick with Travis Kelce *and* throttle Derrick Henry behind the line of scrimmage?

“If you can hit dudes in the mouth, that’s a big bonus,” says the AFC personnel man. But, he warns: It’s not something that can be taught. “God gives you that.”

THE PRIMARY narrative of Tampa Bay’s Super Bowl victory in February centered on Tom Brady, the ageless quarterback who left the comforts of a Patriots dynasty and conjured up a championship with a franchise known more for its losing.

But a deeper look at the Bucs’ stunning 31–9 win over the Chiefs suggests that Bowles’s pass rush—which hit Patrick Mahomes 10 times and sacked him three times, and which logged more quarterback pressures than any defense in Super Bowl history—deserves just as much of the acclaim.

To pull off that feat, David and White had to play a nearly perfect game against Kansas City, whose armada of pass-catching weapons provides the ideal scenario for Mahomes on almost every snap. Although he is known as a theatrical deep ball passer, the quarterback’s intermediate-level targets—those darts fired 5 to 10 yards beyond the line of scrimmage—are the engine that drive the Chiefs’ offense. That is because, with defensive backs retreating to defend the deep ball, linebackers are often left on an island.

Against Tampa Bay, however, so many of Mahomes’s dropbacks resulted in some kind of confusion or hesitation. Obviously, a pass rush was coming—but, for the most part, he couldn’t get the ball out of his hands because those intermediate targets, so used to operating in open spaces, were suddenly boxed in by David and White.

Mahomes would drop back and watch as his receivers started dragging across the middle, anticipating a linebacker mismatch. But there was David, flipping his hips from an awkward coverage position to place himself in front of Kelce, sometimes even in single coverage. Or there was White, locating running back Darrel Williams out of the backfield and closing the 5-yard gap in a split second, leading Mahomes to panic-roll toward the sideline and sidearm the ball out of bounds.

“We talk every day,” Bowles says of his relationship with David over the past two years. “About the how, what, why, where and when; about how everybody fits and where everybody fits.” Soon enough, David was taking what he’d learned and coaching it on the field. “He’s teaching guys, and everyone runs the defense, not just what I call.”

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LINEBACKER REVIVAL

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THAT'S A WRAP

In his second season, White was the Bucs' leading tackler and a second-team All-Pro.

It's a stark contrast from what David experienced just a few years ago. Linebacking, he admits, was losing its joy. And other linebackers around the league, he says, told him the same thing. They would do all the work and receive none of the credit. They were gassed and forced out of position, and they weren't consistently involved in any of the glamorous aspects of the defense, like hitting the quarterback or ball-hawking in the secondary. "We're looking at each other like, *Nah, this can't be us*," David says. "We can do the same things they're doing but better."

When Bowles arrived, in 2019, David was ready for something new, and he began peppering the incoming coordinator with questions about how his scheme would work. Where would David fit in a base 3–4 defense that was unlike anything he'd ever played in before?

Bowles says the intention wasn't to create a scheme to maximize David. He cites an old saying from his mentor, Bill Parcells: "Let giraffes be giraffes and elephants be elephants." In David, Bowles saw a linebacker capable of doing more than he'd been asked in the past, and he saw a similar talent in White. He let his imagination do the rest. David is a Bucs lifer, a second-round draft pick in 2012. It wasn't until January that he finally appeared in a playoff game. Four weeks later, he was lifting the Lombardi Trophy.

When the upcoming season kicks off, there will no doubt be plenty of teams still hoping to survive with smaller, faster defensive players, lacking the heft to hold up against a power running game. Or with sturdy linebackers absent the versatility to handle themselves in coverage.

Bowles will still be cracking jokes. Those other defensive coordinators, though, may not be in the mood. □

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FOOTBALL PREVIEW

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AFC

EAST		NORTH	
BILLS 3	11–6	BROWNS 2	12–5
PATRIOTS 5	11–6	RAVENS 7	11–6
DOLPHINS	9–8	STEELERS	9–8
JETS	5–12	BENGALS	3–14

WEST		SOUTH	
CHIEFS 1	12–5	TITANS 4	11–6
CHARGERS 6	11–6	COLTS	10–7
BRONCOS	9–8	JAGUARS	7–10
RAIDERS	6–11	TEXANS	1–16

WILD CARD

2 BROWNS *over* RAVENS 7
3 BILLS *over* CHARGERS 6
5 PATRIOTS *over* TITANS 4

DIVISIONAL ROUND

1 CHIEFS *over* PATRIOTS 5
2 BROWNS *over* BILLS 3

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

1 CHIEFS *over* BROWNS 2

TWO OUT OF THREE AIN'T BAD
Mahomes is eyeing a run to a third straight Super Bowl—this time behind a fortified offensive line.

RTS

The Super Bowl returns to Los Angeles (Inglewood, to be exact) for the first time in 29 years. Expect ***PATRICK MAHOMES*** to be there, taking on another hometown team (Rams) led by a freshly acquired QB (Matthew Stafford)—this time with a different outcome

NFC

EAST		NORTH	
COWBOYS 4	11–6	PACKERS 2	13–4
GIANTS 6	10–7	VIKINGS	9–8
WASHINGTON	9–8	BEARS	6–11
EAGLES	3–14	LIONS	4–13

WEST		SOUTH	
RAMS 1	13–4	BUCCANEERS 3	11–6
49ERS 5	11–6	SAINTS 7	10–7
SEAHAWKS	9–8	FALCONS	6–11
CARDINALS	5–12	PANTHERS	4–13

WILD CARD
2 PACKERS *over* SAINTS 7
3 BUCCANEERS *over* GIANTS 6
5 49ERS *over* COWBOYS 4

DIVISIONAL ROUND
1 RAMS *over* 49ERS 5
3 BUCCANEERS *over* PACKERS 2

CHAMPIONSHIP GAME
1 RAMS *over* BUCCANEERS 3

SUPER BOWL LVI
Feb. 13, 2022
SoFi Stadium, Inglewood, Calif.

CHIEFS *over* **RAMS**

BILLS OR BILL'S?

It looks like Buffalo is the new powerhouse, but Belichick's Patriots have a good chance to reclaim the division they ruled for so long

by CONOR ORR

Stefon Diggs
Bills

3.04
THE AVERAGE TIME (IN SECONDS) THAT JOSH ALLEN HAD TO DELIVER A PASS LAST SEASON, THIRD-MOST AMONG NFL QBS.

UNTIL LAST SEASON, the AFC East operated at a familiar rhythm. The Patriots, led by quarterback Tom Brady and coach Bill Belichick, won 16 of 20 division titles. They made whatever changes were required from year to year and sprinted ahead early, leaving the other teams to trip over themselves in an effort to catch up.

The division snapped out of its trance in 2020 as New England, sans Brady, faltered and the Bills finally maximized their potential. Buffalo's ascendance—not to mention an impressive rebuild in Miami, led by coach Brian Flores—will extend the disruption of the old status quo. For the first time in ages, three teams (sorry, Jets) are capable of winning the division.

Buffalo is the obvious front-runner now that 25-year-old Josh Allen has transformed from a raw quarterback prospect into an MVP candidate. The journey had its share of speed bumps, but once coordinator Brian Daboll found a way to create a matchup spread offense that maximized both Allen's mobility and his cannon arm, the Bills were able to keep defenses on their heels. In his first season in Buffalo, Stefon Diggs solidified himself as a true No. 1 wideout who can succeed against coverages designed to stop him.

The Patriots, after finishing 7–9 last year—their first losing season since 2000—could bounce back after capitalizing on a depressed free-agent market and signing wide receivers (Kendrick Bourne, Nelson Agholor), top-tier tight ends (Hunter Henry, Jonnu Smith) and one of the more versatile pass rushers on the market (Matthew Judon). New England also drafted Alabama quarterback Mac Jones at No. 15 and Crimson Tide defensive tackle Christian Barmore at No. 38, addressing two significant areas of need. If Jones does not start this season, he will back up Cam Newton—or Belichick will use them interchangeably, creating two different systems that can flummox opponents. The Pats also get back a raft of defensive starters who opted out of the 2020 season, including inside linebacker Dont'a Hightower.

Under Flores, the Dolphins finally took the time to nip bad habits and mediocre practices

TIMOTHY T LUDWIG/GETTY IMAGES

and are now pouring resources into developing QB Tua Tagovailoa as quickly as possible. The No. 5 pick of 2020 debuted with a thud last year and found himself sidelined repeatedly for backup Ryan Fitzpatrick. Tagovailoa has a high ceiling, but he could be looking over his shoulder again this year after Miami signed capable backup Jacoby Brissett, who is familiar with coordinator George Godsey's offense. While Tagovailoa's potential may be greater than any quarterback in the division, there is no telling whether he will mesh with the offense and play more confidently this season.

New York has a new coach, former 49ers defensive coordinator Robert Saleh. Not only is he a gregarious personality and sound defensive leader, but he has also brought in offensive coordinator Mike LaFleur, who helped build the explosive system now being run in San Francisco, Tennessee and Green Bay. If the new coaching staff can lift talented rookie quarterback Zach Wilson, the No. 2 pick from BYU, to immediate capability, the Jets could turn some heads. Otherwise New York, coming off five losing seasons, would be the one team in the division that performs its familiar role. □

PREDICTIONS

1 BUFFALO BILLS

BEST CASE
The Bills expand on last year's offense, adding another weapon before the season starts through a trade. This diversifies the looks they put on film last year, and they score even more—a feat, considering last year's unit was No. 2 in the NFL. Buffalo becomes a real Super Bowl contender.

WORST CASE
New England retakes the division by solving the Bills' offense. Belichick, who has been practicing against what is basically Buffalo's scheme every summer for the last two decades, defends it better in 2021 with the pieces he has added thanks to free-agent signings and the return of COVID-19 opt-outs.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 11W 6L

2 NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS

BEST CASE
The offense, sixth-worst in the NFL last year, takes off behind a healthier Newton, who will have a better command of the system in his second season and will benefit from the improved weapons around him. He gives the offense the same kind of run/pass threat that Allen does in Buffalo.

WORST CASE
The Patriots' free-agency splurge proves to be a reflection of their desperation, a sign that the roster is fading, paper thin and ultimately punchless without Brady. Newton struggles, and Jones is thrown in too soon. Injuries expose deficiencies on the offensive line and in the secondary.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 11W 6L

3 MIAMI DOLPHINS

BEST CASE
Tagovailoa, in his second NFL season and now well-removed from the brutal hip injury that ended his college career, develops into a top-15 starter. As he gains confidence, he plays much more freely, the way he showed he could against the Cardinals in his second start last year, in Week 8.

WORST CASE
The Dolphins once again shuffle between Tagovailoa and his backup, now Brissett, which overshadows the progress of their defense and wastes the rookie season of WR Jaylen Waddle, the No. 6 pick from Alabama. Fans rue Miami's choice of Tagovailoa over Justin Herbert in the 2020 draft.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 9W 8L

4 NEW YORK JETS

BEST CASE
Eight wins would be miraculous given the state of the roster. New York fans are optimistic, though, after the team hangs close in games it would have been blown out in last year, and rookie QB Wilson throws twice as many TDs as interceptions while his mechanics remain sound.

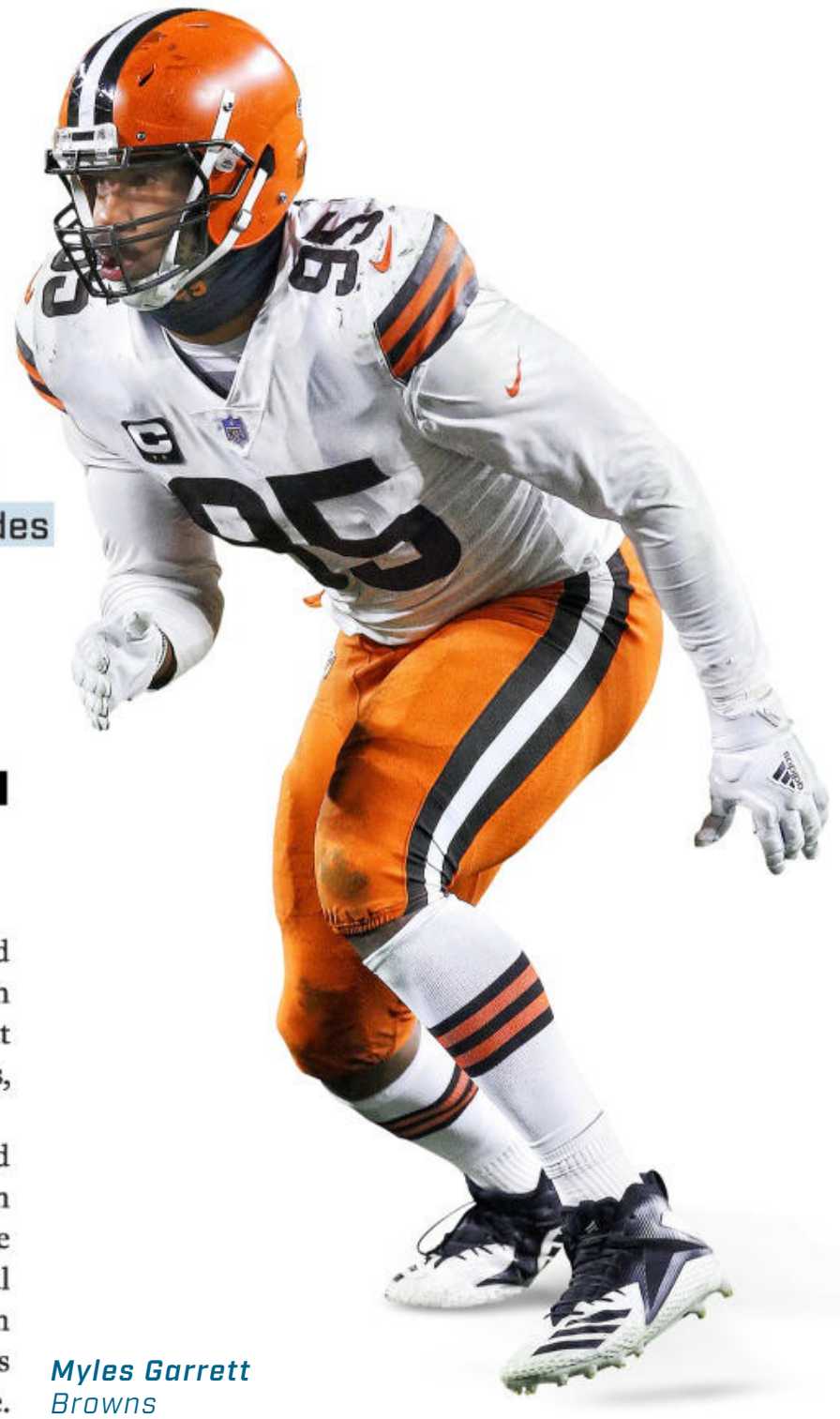
WORST CASE
The Jets are unable to run their new Kyle Shanahan–style offense effectively. This means that Wilson, who was afforded ample time in the pocket at BYU, plays under constant pressure and, like so many New York QBs before him, develops bad habits as losses continue to mount.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 5W 12L

MOVING ON UP

The North has long been about the powers in Pittsburgh and Baltimore, but after two decades Cleveland is finally poised to take charge

by CONOR ORR



Myles Garrett
Browns

CHARLES LECLAIRE/USA TODAY SPORTS

1

THE NUMBER OF PLAYERS IN NFL HISTORY WHO HAVE MORE SACKS PER GAME (0.83) THAN MYLES GARRETT THROUGH THEIR FIRST FOUR SEASONS. THAT PLAYER IS REGGIE WHITE.

THE BROWNS' EMERGENCE last year shifted an already competitive division into an even higher gear, upending the power structure that had defined the AFC North since the early 2000s, especially over the last five seasons.

The standard had been that the Ravens and Steelers battled for supremacy, while down below the Bengals fielded flawed squads and the Browns squandered their enviable draft capital and cap space. It seemed that Cleveland's main role in the league was to feed better-run teams the players they couldn't figure out how to use.

That changed when chief strategy officer Paul DePodesta, hired in 2016, was finally able to assemble a staff that shared a vision, a first for the franchise since the end of the Cold War. General manager Andrew Berry and coach Kevin Stefanski, both brought on in '20, worked in tandem rather than at cross purposes, as happened within previous regimes. And, with a raft of stars in their athletic prime, such as defensive end Myles Garrett, RB Nick Chubb, free safety John Johnson, guards Joel Bitonio and Wyatt Teller, center JC Tretter and receivers Jarvis Landry and Odell Beckham Jr., the Browns are now a threat to go deep in the playoffs. Their defeat of the Steelers in last season's wild-card round seemed as if it was 20 years in the making.

Even though Cleveland looks to be on track at long last, the path to its first division title since 1989 is rocky and rooted. For the first time in the Lamar Jackson era, the Ravens have a formidable wide receiver group, featuring Marquise Brown, Sammy Watkins and first-round pick Rashod Bateman, who was viewed as a consensus top-15 choice before complications due to a symptomatic case of COVID-19 sidetracked his final season at Minnesota. Baltimore's offense could expand beyond the downhill running attack that took advantage of defenses who were thrown off by the triple-option-type concepts that were so different than what they saw from other opponents.

The Steelers, too, can contend behind their stout defense and a good-enough offense. Though this may be the last ride for 39-year-old

quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, he has a creative new offensive coordinator in Matt Canada. Canada was Pittsburgh's QB coach last year but came from the college ranks, where his imaginative ideas had already influenced NFL offenses. Expect the Steelers to have playmakers such as WRs JuJu Smith-Schuster, Chase Claypool and Diontae Johnson, and first-round RB Najee Harris lined up all over the field and featured in backfield theatrics designed to confuse defenses.

In the division's cellar, once again, are the Bengals. Coach Zac Taylor, in his third season, has acquired enough pieces to run his offense properly. That said, his biggest challenge this year will be contending with somewhat outsized expectations. Cincinnati drafted a franchise quarterback last year in Joe Burrow and a top receiver in Burrow's former LSU teammate Ja'Marr Chase this year. Now, after having won six games the last two seasons, Taylor will need to show significant improvement. That won't be easy, given that Burrow is coming back after tearing his left ACL and MCL in Week 11. He will have to reacclimate to game speed, and do so behind a Cincinnati offensive line that is still a work in progress. □

PREDICTIONS

1 CLEVELAND BROWNS

BEST CASE
The Browns, who have the highest ceiling in the division, compete with the Chiefs for the conference title. QB Baker Mayfield, who bounced back from sophomore struggles to throw 26 TDs and only eight interceptions last year, is even better in his second season under Stefanski's lead.

WORST CASE
The offensive line gets dinged up and the run game struggles in divisional matchups against the stout Ravens and Steelers. Top draft picks CB Greg Newsome II of Northwestern and LB Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah of Notre Dame don't develop quickly enough to help this year.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 12W 5L

2 BALTIMORE RAVENS

BEST CASE
The Ravens introduce new wrinkles to an offense that surprised the league in 2019. Jackson successfully challenges opponents vertically, and especially down the sidelines, where he has historically shied from attempting high-risk throws.

WORST CASE
The Ravens still lean on the run, and the risk finally catches up with them. As injuries mount, Baltimore suffers from a lack of depth at running back and at tight end. LT Ronnie Stanley (ankle) and TE Nick Boyle (knee, leg) struggle to regain form as they return from season-ending injuries from 2020.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 11W 6L

3 PITTSBURGH STEELERS

BEST CASE
Roethlisberger's signs of decline last year turn out to have been merely a hangover from the surgeries he underwent going into 2020. An offense that connected on relatively few deep shots last season (only seven pass completions of 40 yards or more) makes those plays work this year.

WORST CASE
As Roethlisberger struggles, it becomes obvious that the Steelers waited too long to find his successor. With the pass game defanged, the rookie season of Harris from Alabama disappoints because he faces eight defenders near the line of scrimmage so often.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 9W 8L

4 CINCINNATI BENGALS

BEST CASE
Taylor's offense finally clicks. While this doesn't lift the Bengals that much in the loaded AFC North, they play their division foes with encouraging toughness and nab a few surprising wins during the season. Burrow and Chase display the chemistry that helped them win a national title at LSU.

WORST CASE
The Bengals' inability to protect Burrow continues into 2021, and real concern develops over whether they have the right coaches and personnel to help the 2020 No. 1 pick prosper. Cincinnati regrets not drafting one of the top tackles who were available when it selected Chase at No. 5.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 3W 14L

THE QB SHUFFLE

Managing big changes at the position will determine the prospects for three teams in the division, now and into the future

by CONOR ORR

Darius Leonard
Colts

ANDY LYONS/GETTY IMAGES

11
TOUCHDOWNS OF 50 YARDS OR MORE BY DERRICK HENRY SINCE 2016, WHICH IS SECOND ONLY TO CHIEFS WR TYREEK HILL AND EASILY MOST OF ANY RUNNING BACK IN THAT SPAN.

ONCE UPON A TIME, the expectation was that Deshaun Watson and the Texans would rule over this division for years. That was before this offseason, when Watson first demanded a trade and then was accused by 22 massage therapists of sexual misconduct, opening him up to civil and possibly criminal cases, as well as league discipline. Watson has denied all charges, but the quarterback's future with the team and possibly the NFL are murky.

Meanwhile, a trio of intriguing passers have an opportunity to take control of the AFC South. Each has his promise and his pitfalls.

It's possible that Tennessee's offense, ranked No. 3 last year, will continue humming despite coordinator Arthur Smith's leaving to coach the Falcons. After all, the Titans still have 2020 rushing leader Derrick Henry (2,027 yards) and QB Ryan Tannehill, who displayed elite efficiency under Smith. And Tannehill already had one huge target in A.J. Brown; now he's bookended by two-time All-Pro Julio Jones. But if new coordinator Todd Downing's schemes are not as effective in opening up receivers, Tannehill could easily regress.

The Colts' new QB is Carson Wentz, acquired from the Eagles in a trade and reunited with coach Frank Reich, who was Wentz's coordinator in Philadelphia. After Aug. 2 foot surgery, Wentz could miss the early part of this season or more, but the long-term hope is that Reich can take advantage of their history and develop an offense that gets Wentz, who fell into bad habits in Philadelphia, back to the form that made him an MVP candidate in 2017.

In Jacksonville, if Trevor Lawrence can acclimate as quickly as Andrew Luck, the last prospect who came into the NFL with this level of expectation, the Jaguars could bounce back from last year's 1–15 record with surprising quickness. But if Lawrence's development is hampered by playing on a roster that is raw, that won't be good for coach Urban Meyer, the two-time NCAA champion who was controversially chosen to leap to the NFL at age 57 and lead the most critical era in Jags history.

And then there are the Texans. At press time Houston was attempting to accommodate Watson's demand for a trade, but his legal issues leave his status uncertain. Assuming Watson is done in Houston, the team's only goal this year under new coach David Culley should be to see whether its other quarterbacks can lead the team. Veteran Tyrod Taylor is capable under center, and Houston was fortunate to land Davis Mills, a high-upside prospect out of Stanford, in the third round. Should either emerge as a long-term option, the task of rebuilding this threadbare roster will become far easier.

The AFC South is a cautionary tale at looking too far into the future—and it's not just about Watson. It wasn't long ago that Luck seemed to have a Peyton Manning–esque stranglehold on the division, before his surprise retirement in 2019. Now the landscape is wide open, with anyone but Houston looking plausible. Sure, the Titans have Henry, but he has logged two straight seasons of almost 400 carries. The Colts have an elite defense, led by linebacker Darius Leonard, tackle DeForest Buckner and esteemed coordinator Matt Eberflus. Who knows? Perhaps even the young Jaguars are ready to take charge. □

PREDICTIONS

1 TENNESSEE TITANS

BEST CASE
The offense hums along as the losses of TE Jonnu Smith and WR Corey Davis in free agency are offset by the acquisitions of WRs Julio Jones and Josh Reynolds and the emergence of fourth-year TE Anthony Firkser. Free-agent end Bud Dupree adds a new punch to last season's 28th-ranked defense.

WORST CASE
Henry finally wears down, and the turnover at offensive coordinator and at the wide receiver position (Adam Humphries is also now gone from the roster) is too much. Tannehill regresses into the middling, inconsistent quarterback who was traded by Miami in 2019.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 11W 6L

2 INDIANAPOLIS COLTS

BEST CASE
Wentz heals quickly from August foot surgery (projected recovery is 5-12 weeks) and finds his old form behind a strong offensive line and with more accomplished pass catchers than he had in Philly. Parris Campbell, a 2019 second-round pick, finally stays healthy, and his speed elevates the offense.

WORST CASE
Wentz is slow to return from surgery, exposing the Colts' lack of quarterbacking depth. Indy must either fill in with a last-minute veteran acquisition or turn to its inexperienced in-house options, either 2020 fourth-round pick Jacob Eason or 2021 sixth-rounder Sam Ehlinger.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 10W 7L

3 JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS

BEST CASE
Lawrence is as pro-ready as advertised. He and back Travis Etienne Jr., his Clemson teammate and the Jags' other first-round pick, electrify the offense. Jacksonville finishes the year close to .500 and appears ready to make the playoffs in Lawrence's second season.

WORST CASE
The Jaguars' schemes look dated, especially on offense, as Lawrence fails to flourish under offensive coordinator Darrell Bevell. Jacksonville shakes up its coaching staff after the season, giving the feeling that the team is mishandling the best QB prospect in years.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 7W 10L

4 HOUSTON TEXANS

BEST CASE
By winning more than two games and finishing with something other than the worst record in the NFL, the Texans exceed expectations. The team plays hard for Culley. Mills establishes himself as the QB of the future while the front office accumulates as much draft capital as possible.

WORST CASE
Taylor starts all season at quarterback and ekes out enough victories with Houston's crew of middling veterans to drop the Texans back in the draft. This robs them of the ability to select one of the top QBs of the class of 2022 and put the Watson situation firmly in the rearview mirror.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 1W 16L

SECOND CHANCES

What's a division rival to do to overtake the Chiefs—focus on defense to try to stop them, or on offense in an attempt to keep up?

by CONOR ORR

Justin Herbert
Chargers

61.1
YARDS TRAVELED IN THE AIR FOR JUSTIN HERBERT'S 53-YARD TD PASS TO TYRON JOHNSON IN OCTOBER, THE SECOND-MOST AIR YARDS FOR A PASS IN THE LAST TWO SEASONS.

▶ **WITH THEIR STAR** quarterback and innovative coach, the Chiefs appear to be the modern equivalent of the 49ers of the 1980s with Joe Montana and Bill Walsh, and that poses a conundrum for the rest of the AFC West. How do you plan for your own season when you go in knowing, deep down, that you won't win the division?

One way is the Broncos' path, which is both an acknowledgment and a response to the brilliance of QB Patrick Mahomes and coach Andy Reid. Denver drafted a cornerback, Patrick Surtain II of Alabama, with the ninth pick, and in free agency invested in cornerbacks Kyle Fuller (one year, $9.5 million) and Ronald Darby (three years, $30 million). These moves give coach Vic Fangio his best chance to counter Kansas City's passing attack and to compensate for his own team's offensive shortcomings, especially its uncertainty at quarterback. Denver will be choosing between Drew Lock, who hasn't seized the job in 18 starts since being drafted in the second round in 2019, and Teddy Bridgewater, who started for the Panthers last year and was then dealt to the Broncos for a sixth-round pick.

The Chargers have also looked to amp up their defense, replacing coach Anthony Lynn with Brandon Staley, formerly the defensive coordinator of the Rams. Staley, 38, is a Fangio disciple who led his former team to a No. 1–ranked defense in his lone season calling coverages. The Chargers' hope is that on offense quarterback Justin Herbert will build off his Rookie of the Year season, enjoying improved protection from a line that added All-Pro center Corey Linsley from the Packers and tackle Rashawn Slater from Northwestern with the 13th pick of the draft, while Staley's new direction will reinvigorate the D. That unit, led by end Joey Bosa and safety Derwin James, back from injury, is talented and had finished in the top 10 of several key statistical categories at the beginning of Lynn's tenure before falling off the past two seasons.

Then there are the Raiders, who are still waiting for the 10-year, $100 million contract they gave to coach Jon Gruden in 2018 to pay off. Yes, the team has improved steadily in his first three

JOHN W. MCDONOUGH

seasons, but it has also failed to make the playoffs and has undergone multiple changes of direction. The roster has its steadying forces—running back Josh Jacobs, tight end Darren Waller and quarterback Derek Carr. But during their tenure Gruden and GM Mike Mayock have built and then dismantled the most expensive offensive line in the league, traded away a dominant pass rusher in Khalil Mack and devoted critical assets toward replacing his production, and made ill-advised moves at wide receiver (Antonio Brown, Martavis Bryant). Meanwhile, Las Vegas has the worst secondary in the division, a problem when competing against Mahomes and also an emerging star in Herbert.

This offseason the Raiders signed WR John Brown and RB Kenyan Drake, and drafted Alabama offensive tackle Alex Leatherwood with their top pick. Vegas has chosen to try to keep pace with the Chiefs, rather than focus on dulling K.C.'s greatest asset: its creative passing game. Whatever their methods of attack against Kansas City, the Broncos, Chargers and Raiders will have years to refine and rethink them, because the defending two-time AFC champs will be formidable for years to come. □

PREDICTIONS

1 KANSAS CITY CHIEFS

BEST CASE
The Chiefs continue to refine their winning formula: a top-rated offense complemented by an opportunistic defense. This year the running game takes off behind an O-line that added tackle Orlando Brown Jr. and guards Joe Thuney and Kyle Long, which eases the workload of Mahomes.

WORST CASE
The O-line misses longtime tackles Eric Fisher and Mitchell Schwartz. The departure of WR Sammy Watkins to Baltimore hurts because 2019 second-round pick Mecole Hardman doesn't develop as a reliable option at the position. Even so, Kansas City still has the talent to make the playoffs.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 12W 5L

2 DENVER BRONCOS

BEST CASE
Denver's defense is a top-five unit and that, along with competent game management at quarterback, propels the team into the playoffs. Von Miller again terrorizes opposing QBs after missing 2020 with an ankle injury, and rookie Surtain steps right in alongside Denver's new veteran corners.

WORST CASE
Neither Lock nor Bridgewater is the solution to an improved passing game, despite the talent among Denver's highly drafted receivers (wideouts Courtland Sutton, Jerry Jeudy and KJ Hamler, TE Noah Fant). After the season, the search begins for a new coach and a quarterback, too.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 11W 6L

3 LOS ANGELES CHARGERS

BEST CASE
Herbert builds off his stellar rookie season. The performance of the defense justifies Staley's status as last winter's hot coaching hire. Rookie tackle Slater and new center Linsley elevate the offensive line. Winning the division may be too much to ask, but a wild-card berth is not.

WORST CASE
The defense misses departed DE Melvin Ingram, and rookie CB Asante Samuel Jr., the second-round pick from Florida State, needs seasoning. At tight end, free agent Jared Cook doesn't make up for the loss of Hunter Henry. Herbert's sophomore slump throws the new coaching staff into chaos.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 9W 8L

4 LAS VEGAS RAIDERS

BEST CASE
Gruden finally takes the Raiders to the playoffs, and his vision for developing the team suddenly seems brilliant. Last year's 25th-ranked defense improves thanks to new coordinator Gus Bradley, free agent DE Yannick Ngakoue and second-round safety Trevon Moehrig.

WORST CASE
Leatherwood struggles in his rookie season, and devoting cap space to signing Drake (two years, $14.5 million) when the team has Jacobs proves to be a mistake. Owner Mark Davis reconsiders Gruden. Few coaches miss the playoffs four years in a row and come back for a fifth season.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 6W 11L

CHUMPS CHANGE

Last year every team in this sorry division had a losing record, but in 2021 three of them are ready to break out—and maybe in a big way

by GARY GRAMLING

Daniel Jones
Giants

ERICK W. RASCO

3

NUMBER OF THE EIGHT LOWEST-SCORING TEAMS IN 2020 THAT PLAYED IN THE NFC EAST: WASHINGTON (RANKED 25TH), THE EAGLES (26TH) AND THE GIANTS (31ST). DALLAS RANKED 17TH.

▶ **YOU COULDN'T HAVE** scripted a more fitting finale for the worst division in football last year.

It began on the afternoon of Week 17, when the Giants stayed alive for the NFC East crown (with a 6–10 record!) by beating the Cowboys, thanks to running back Wayne Gallman's fumbling—of his own accord and after gaining the necessary yardage for a game-clinching first down—but then recovering the loose ball with his glutes. Still, New York needed the Eagles to top Washington at night. That's when Philadelphia, despite being close entering the fourth quarter, replaced starter Jalen Hurts with overmatched backup Nate Sudfeld. The result was a prime-time debacle and a division-clinching victory for a seven-win team with no name, and the eventual dismissal of Philly coach Doug Pederson.

The good news is this quartet that finished a combined 17 games under .500 should field a champion with a winning record in 2021. In fact, three teams could be among the conference's best.

The defending titlist—the "Football Team"—is as good in the trenches as anyone in the NFL. The defensive line, featuring 2020 Rookie of the Year Chase Young and Montez Sweat on the outside and the exceedingly underrated Jonathan Allen at tackle, can be the foundation of an elite unit. Washington's creative ground game, led by second-year back Antonio Gibson and a talented offensive line, will complement that defense nicely. The question is at quarterback: Last year's rotation of Dwayne Haskins and Alex Smith underwhelmed, and both are gone. Free-agent signee Ryan Fitzpatrick qualifies as an improvement, but can the 38-year-old string together a consistent season from start to finish for the first time in his career?

The Giants' roster might not pop on paper, but the two most important people in the organization seem ready to take the next step: coach Joe Judge and quarterback Daniel Jones. In his first season Judge got immediate results from an undermanned roster, with the help of defensive coordinator Patrick Graham. Jones is built to be a ball distributor, and with an

improving O-line, the return of running back Saquon Barkley and the signing of contested-catch master Kenny Golladay from Detroit, he could be directing a top-10 attack.

In terms of pure talent, no one in this division can match the Cowboys. Last year was a lost season—it began with sloppy, turnover-filled games then got worse with quarterback Dak Prescott's broken ankle in Week 5. With Prescott back, the offense could be special. If new defensive coordinator Dan Quinn can find the answers with a young group that couldn't fully execute predecessor Mike Nolan's complex schemes, Big D could make some big noise.

The Eagles, meanwhile, are embarking on a rebuild, having replaced Pederson with 40-year-old Nick Sirianni, the former Colts offensive coordinator. They traded one-time franchise QB Carson Wentz to Indianapolis and will pair a Hurts-led offense that's a little too young with a Fletcher Cox–led defense that's a little too old. The fact that Philly's front office first spent the spring building up draft capital, then the summer struggling to hide its interest in a certain quarterback in Houston, suggests that this team knows it's in for a long autumn. □

PREDICTIONS

1 DALLAS COWBOYS

BEST CASE
Prescott picks up where he left off with an MVP season. The offense overwhelms opponents while the defense—playing faster thanks to a simpler scheme—holds on enough for Dallas to not only win the division but also multiple playoff games for the first time since 1995.

WORST CASE
The offense has a solid year and picks up plenty of yards, but sloppiness and turnovers put too much pressure on an underwhelming defense that struggles to adjust to its third coordinator in three seasons. Coach Mike McCarthy doesn't make it to Year 3 of his deal—or even to Week 18 of this season.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD **11W 6L**

2 NEW YORK GIANTS

BEST CASE
Crow is on the menu for pundits who bashed the 2019 selection of Jones. The young QB emerges as a franchise player, winning with his arm and his legs. Meanwhile, the young secondary becomes rock-solid, and New York enters the playoffs as one of those teams that no one wants to face.

WORST CASE
The offense is better but not good enough behind Jones, who is still prone to turnovers. The defense's lack of a pure edge rusher continues to be an issue as the Giants struggle to close out games. While Judge keeps his job, New York takes a long look at the quarterback market during the offseason.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD **10W 7L**

3 WASHINGTON FOOTBALL

BEST CASE
Young wins Defensive Player of the Year as the leader of the league's best unit, which is elevated by rookie linebacker Jamin Davis, Washington's first-round pick from Kentucky. A touch of FitzMagic is all the offense needs to make the team a Super Bowl contender.

WORST CASE
The defense proves stingy, but it also doesn't take the ball away often enough to deliver a truly elite season. Fitzpatrick delivers his usual mix of dizzying highs and terrifying lows—the latter, unfortunately, coming during a late-season slump that keeps the WFT out of the postseason.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD **9W 8L**

4 PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

BEST CASE
Hurts, viewed by the front office as a one-year stopgap, plays well enough to keep the Eagles in most games. They fall short of the playoffs, but he establishes himself as the QB of the future, allowing the team to invest its stash of draft choices in both the defense and Hurts's supporting cast.

WORST CASE
The injury bug once again bites down hard on Philly, especially its aging defense. As a result, Sirianni is frequently forced to abandon his run-heavy game plan, forcing dual-threat Hurts to become strictly a passer, which defenses love. The Eagles don't just lose most weeks, they lose ugly.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD **3W 14L**

GREEN ACRES

An unhappy quarterback nearly put their season in jeopardy, but the Packers patched things up and will once again be the team to beat

by GARY GRAMLING

Dalvin Cook
Vikings

1

PACKERS' LOSSES TO A DIVISION OPPONENT, IN 12 GAMES, SINCE MATT LAFLEUR ARRIVED AS COACH. IN THE VIKINGS' 28–22 UPSET AT LAMBEAU FIELD IN NOVEMBER, DALVIN COOK PILED UP 226 YARDS FROM SCRIMMAGE.

FOR ABOUT THREE months this spring and summer, rumors swirled that Aaron Rodgers was done with Green Bay, and the NFC North looked like it could be wide open. But by the time training camps began in late July, Rodgers was back with the Pack and, despite the turmoil, Green Bay figures to own the division for the third straight year.

One thing Rodgers has made clear since the end of last season: His relationship with coach Matt LaFleur is strong. The duo has gone 13–3 and advanced to the conference championship in each of their two seasons together, and there's no reason Rodgers can't duplicate his MVP production of last season. To break through to the Super Bowl, though, the Packers need a steadier performance from their defense. Green Bay moved on from coordinator Mike Pettine after three seasons—his group performed well but the complicated system led to untimely gaffes in January. Joe Barry, most recently an assistant head coach who oversaw linebackers for the Rams, will take over a unit that has All-Pro talents in cornerback Jaire Alexander, nose tackle Kenny Clark and edge rusher Za'Darius Smith, as well as a potential breakout star in third-year lineman Rashan Gary.

The Vikings seem to be gearing up for one more run with Kirk Cousins under center, though their flirtation with Justin Fields before the draft, and their selection of Kellen Mond from Texas A&M in the third round, suggests they're preparing to move on from a good quarterback who eats up a superstar-sized chunk of their cap space. After a transition year for a defense that lost the bulk of its cornerback depth, Minnesota signed former All-Pro CB Patrick Peterson from Arizona and welcomes back star edge rusher Danielle Hunter, who missed last season with a herniated disk. The strategy remains for Mike Zimmer's team: Pair a dominant defense with a run-heavy offense led by Dalvin Cook, who rushed for 1,557 yards and 16 TDs in 14 games last year.

The Bears moved on from the No. 2 pick of 2017, Mitchell Trubisky, but didn't really solve their quarterback quandary in the short term.

BRAD REMPEL/USA TODAY SPORTS

Andy Dalton, 33, has been named the starter, but it's only a matter of time before the reins are handed to Fields, whom the team traded up to draft 11th. If Dalton stumbles early, coach Matt Nagy might have no choice but to hand the ball to the former Ohio State star—ready or not—to keep a locker room that's surely fed up with mediocre QB play. Once again Chicago will rely on a superior defense, though after leading the NFL with 36 takeaways in a stellar '18 season, it has forced only 37 in the last two years. The unit has a new coordinator, Sean Desai, who learned his craft under former Bears DC Vic Fangio.

Under intense first-year coach Dan Campbell, who spoke admiringly of kneecap-biting in his introductory press conference, the Lions will be in a rebuilding year after Matt Patricia's version of the Patriot Way failed to take in Motown. QB Jared Goff replaces longtime starter Matthew Stafford, with a chance to prove he was more than just a product of Sean McVay's genius while with the Rams. The offense will lean on its run game, led by D'Andre Swift, former Packer Jamaal Williams and a potentially stellar line. The best hope for the defense is that Goff & Co. stay on the field as long as possible. □

PREDICTIONS

1 GREEN BAY PACKERS

BEST CASE
The drama of the offseason fades quickly as Rodgers displays MVP form. Their improved defense, which added CB Eric Stokes from Georgia in the first round, finishes in the top 10 and plays its best football in January. The Pack win back-to-back playoff games in Lambeau to get to Super Bowl LVI.

WORST CASE
Rodgers is Rodgers, but the team around him is wobbly—especially a defense that suffers injuries it can ill afford. Green Bay makes the playoffs but loses in the wild-card round. Rodgers sees this as validation of his criticism of the front office; he's off to Denver in 2022.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 13W 4L

2 MINNESOTA VIKINGS

BEST CASE
Hunter returns at an All-Pro level, Zimmer's defense regains its elite status, WR Justin Jefferson is even better in his second season and Cook is named Offensive Player of the Year. It all falls into place for the Vikings, who steal the division title and then get to watch a frustrated Rodgers pack his bags.

WORST CASE
The defense can't recapture that old magic: The veterans look old, and the young guys look green. Too often, Minnesota is playing from behind, which neutralizes Cook and forces Cousins to drop back 40 times a game. The Vikes stumble to a losing record for a second straight year.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 9W 8L

3 CHICAGO BEARS

BEST CASE
After a 2–2 start, Nagy turns the offense over to Fields, and the rookie proves to be the kind of dynamic force Chicago hasn't had under center since the Sid Luckman years. The locker room is rejuvenated and it shows, as the Bears enter the playoffs as a dangerous wild-card team.

WORST CASE
Dalton isn't the answer. Neither is Fields, at least as a rookie. With the offense once again struggling, and the defense good but not great—cap casualty CB Kyle Fuller is missed—the Bears look broken. If Fields is to be the one who revives the offense, it will be in another year, with another coach.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 6W 11L

4 DETROIT LIONS

BEST CASE
The team, in a reflection of its new coach, plays physical and is dominant in the trenches. Goff pilots an efficient, ball-control offense that makes the Lions a tough out. Before you know it, they're sitting at .500 heading into December, making an unlikely run to a wild-card berth.

WORST CASE
To no one's surprise, Detroit looks like a long-term project. Campbell's group plays hard and shows flashes, but a mismatched defense struggles, putting too large a burden on Goff and an undermanned receiving corps. At least the Lions can use their top-three draft pick to grab a new QB.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 4W 13L

STAYING POWER

Three of the division's teams are in transition, while the defending champion Buccaneers return intact, ready to pick up where they left off

by GARY GRAMLING

Taysom Hill
Saints

5

CONSECUTIVE SEASONS THAT THE SAINTS HAVE BEEN ONE OF THE NFL'S TOP-FIVE SCORING TEAMS—BUT DURING DREW BREES'S FOUR-GAME ABSENCE IN 2020, NEW ORLEANS RANKED 18TH IN THE LEAGUE.

IT'S STRANGE TO ask this about a defending Super Bowl champion led by the most successful quarterback ever, but: Do we know how good the Buccaneers are?

If you rewind to last November, Tampa Bay dropped three straight home games to quality opponents (Saints, Rams and Chiefs) while the offense looked utterly disjointed. Then, coming out of a late-season bye week, the Bucs played five straight teams with losing records—including Washington in the wild-card round—to get back on track, and may not have survived a playoff game in New Orleans had it not been for three takeaways in the final 20 minutes. The defense was strong throughout, but, really, the Tom Brady–led offense didn't seem to click until Super Bowl LV. This suggests the Bucs actually have room to improve in 2021.

The champs boast remarkable continuity. They were able to retain free agents such as defensive end Shaq Barrett, wideout Chris Godwin, linebacker Lavonte David and DT Ndamukong Suh, while luring back tight end Rob Gronkowski and—at a discount due to myriad character concerns—wide receiver Antonio Brown.

Tampa Bay is the defending Super Bowl champ, but the Saints have actually won this division four consecutive years. Their defense is deep and talented, but for the first time in the Sean Payton era the question marks are all on the offensive side of the ball. Playing without Drew Brees for the first time in 15 years, Payton will have to decide between a traditional quarterback (the talented but turnover-prone Jameis Winston) and a limited passer who expands the run game (Taysom Hill, who won three of his four starts while Brees was out in 2020). The bigger concern might be who catches their passes. After a record-setting 2019, Michael Thomas was injured and often ineffective last season, and will get a late start in 2021 after having surgery on his troublesome right ankle. Last year's second- and fourth-leading pass catchers, WR Emmanuel Sanders and TE Jared Cook, left via free agency. Wideout Tre'Quan Smith, who has shown flashes in his three NFL seasons, will need to be a consistent threat.

JAMIE SCHWABEROW

Before last season, the division's most recent Super Bowl representative was the Falcons, in 2017—which seems like a long time ago, after three straight losing seasons. Despite moving on to a rookie coach, Arthur Smith, Atlanta has no interest in going into rebuilding mode. Smith, the former Titans offensive coordinator, brings a system similar to the one Matt Ryan played in during his MVP campaign of '16. Future Hall of Fame receiver Julio Jones is in Tennessee now, but Ryan still has weapons in WR Calvin Ridley and tight end Kyle Pitts, a gifted pass catcher from Florida who went fourth in April's draft. The bigger question: Can the defense stop anyone? New coordinator Dean Pees will have to shape up a unit that ranked 29th last year, and key to that will be developing the kind of elite pass rush Atlanta has lacked.

It feels as if the Panthers are one year away with a massive rebuild that began last season under coach Matt Rhule. In 2021 they'll kick the tires on Sam Darnold, the 24-year-old QB whose production didn't rise to his talent level in three substandard years with the Jets. The hope is that coordinator Joe Brady, a sharp offensive mind, can unlock the potential of the No. 3 pick of 2018. □

NFL SCOUTING REPORTS 2021

SOUTH

PREDICTIONS

1 TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS

BEST CASE
The Bucs, who didn't peak in 2020 until late, carry that momentum over into Brady's second year in Tampa. The defense remains dominant while the offense looks sharper with WR Brown, a midseason signing in 2020, more fully integrated this year. Brady chases ring No. 8 well into the winter.

WORST CASE
Playing 20 games last season takes its toll on a team heavy on 30-somethings. The Bucs look sluggish early, and the Saints jet out to a lead in the NFC South. Tampa Bay still grabs a wild-card spot, but the team never gives the impression that a repeat is really within its reach.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 11W 6L

2 NEW ORLEANS SAINTS

BEST CASE
Winston or Hill? Why not both? Payton befuddles defenses with a revolutionary quarterback rotation, featuring the dual-threat Hill as a devastating closer, and the Saints, still deep and talented, transition smoothly from the Brees era. They win the division for a fifth straight season.

WORST CASE
Quarterback ends up being the least of their worries on offense, as Thomas never looks healthy and the heavy burden placed on RB Alvin Kamara results in the superstar's breaking down. New Orleans can't keep up with the Bucs, and settles for a one-and-done postseason as a wild-card team.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 10W 7L

3 ATLANTA FALCONS

BEST CASE
Atlanta shows it kept Ryan for a reason, as the 36-year-old QB looks revived in new coach Smith's offense. Pitts shows why he was the highest-drafted tight end ever. While the defense still struggles at times, the Falcons win enough shootouts to grab a surprise wild-card spot in the NFC.

WORST CASE
The team spends most of the season searching for an identity, as Ryan is undeniably in decline and the offense—and the locker room—misses Jones. The defense is shaky once again, and the Falcons enter the offseason wondering whether they should finally commit to a complete rebuild.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 6W 11L

4 CAROLINA PANTHERS

BEST CASE
It's still baby steps for the Panthers, but they clearly have something special brewing on defense, as second- and third-year players such as S Jeremy Chinn and DE Brian Burns take a big leap. RB Christian McCaffrey, who last season missed 13 games with a variety of injuries, returns to his All-Pro form.

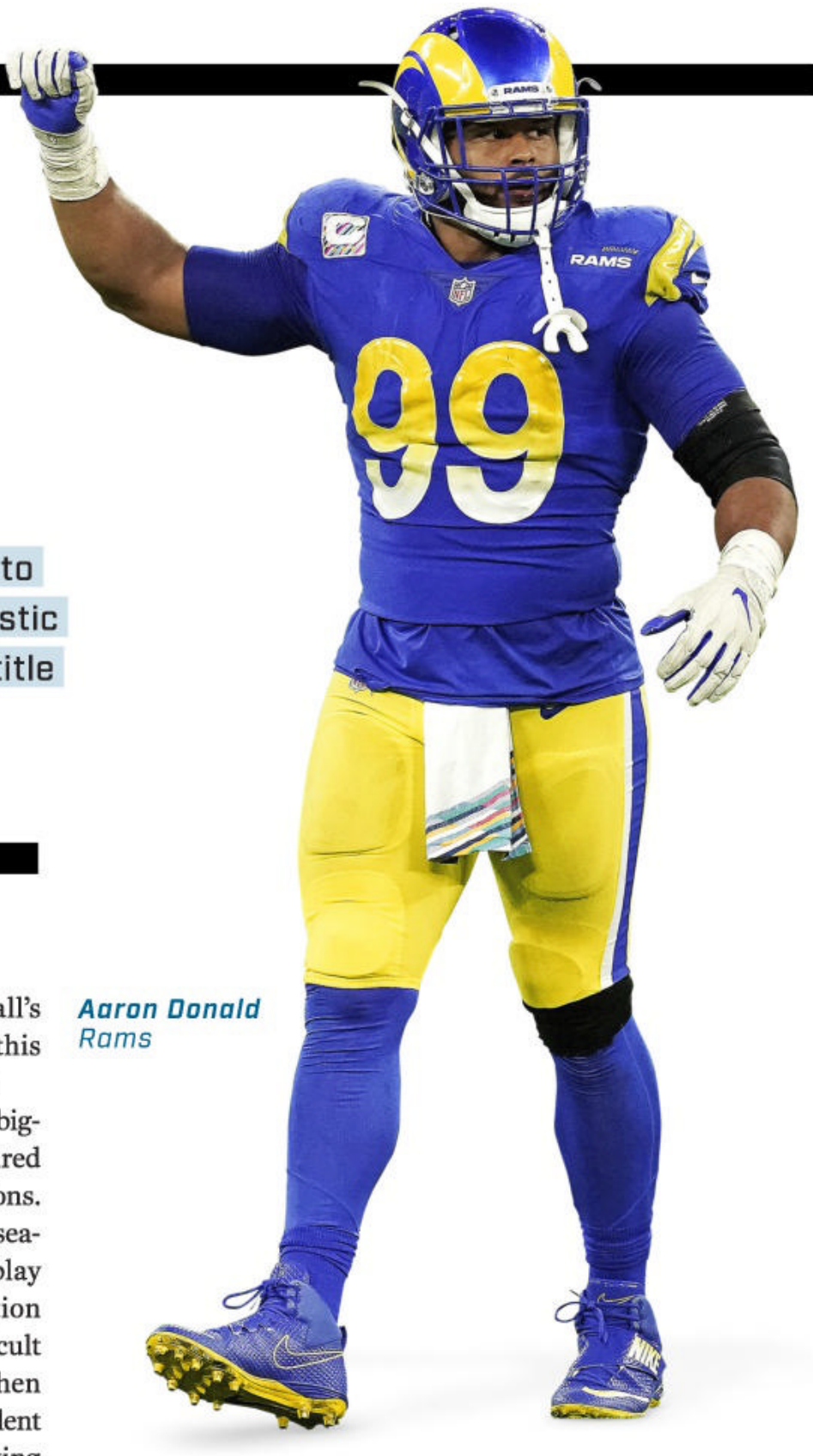
WORST CASE
Darnold shows why the Jets bailed on him, as the quarterback remains far too erratic, despite making the occasional highlight-reel play. A rising young defense keeps the score respectable most weeks, but the Panthers know they're going nowhere until they find a QB.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD 4W 13L

ALL GOOD

If you're looking for a weak link, don't come to the NFC West, where every team has a realistic shot at the playoffs—and some, hopes of a title

by GARY GRAMLING



Aaron Donald
Rams

152

MORE QB PRESSURES AARON DONALD HAS HAD SINCE ENTERING THE NFL IN 2014 THAN ANY OTHER LINEMAN; THE RAMS TACKLE HAS BEEN RATED THE NFL'S BEST PLAYER BY *PRO FOOTBALL FOCUS* FIVE YEARS IN A ROW.

WERE ONE FORCED to name pro football's strongest division heading into Week 1 of this season, the NFC West would be the choice.

That starts with the Rams, who made the biggest move of the offseason when they acquired quarterback Matthew Stafford from the Lions. With Jared Goff under center the past three seasons, coach Sean McVay had to limit his play designs, relying on horizontal misdirection concepts and short passes that made it difficult for Los Angeles to score points quickly when necessary. Enter Stafford, whose elite arm talent and natural feel for out-of-structure playmaking open up all kinds of possibilities. On defense the challenge will be to remain elite after losing whiz kid coordinator Brandon Staley, who took the Chargers' head-coaching job. This unit, led by Aaron Donald at tackle and fellow All-Pro Jalen Ramsey at cornerback, surrendered the fewest points and yards last season. If new DC Raheem Morris can maintain anything close to that level—and health will be key with such a star-reliant roster—the Rams will be as good as anyone in the NFC.

The 49ers know all about how important staying healthy is. The team that led in the fourth quarter of Super Bowl LIV the previous year fell to 6–10 after a blizzard of injuries in 2020. The return of game-changing edge rusher Nick Bosa from a torn left ACL is obviously good news, but the San Francisco defense lost its coordinator, Robert Saleh, to the Jets, and will be playing under a new boss, rookie coordinator DeMeco Ryans. The offense gets back Jimmy Garoppolo, who didn't play particularly well during San Francisco's Super Bowl run and will be challenged by rookie QB Trey Lance of North Dakota State, whom the Niners traded up nine spots to choose at No. 3 in April. The 6' 4", 224-pound Lance played only one game last year (and at the FCS level) and will likely need some development, but if he gets snaps, his elite mobility would add a terrifying element to an already potent rushing attack.

The Seahawks' legendary Legion of Boom defenses were built around a world-class

KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS

secondary playing behind a dominant pass rush, but this year's team has neither. Coach Pete Carroll and coordinator Ken Norton Jr. will have to find a way to apply pressure, perhaps with the help of safety Jamal Adams, who struggled in coverage but thrived as a blitzer last year. Russell Wilson will work with new coordinator Shane Waldron, poached from the Rams. Seattle embraced the "Let Russ Cook" mantra early last season, only to abandon it after a run of ugly turnovers by Wilson. Waldron's challenge will be to maximize a unique quarterback who hasn't thrived outside of an attack that is run-first and heavy on play-action.

With the Cardinals, despite a trade for all-world receiver DeAndre Hopkins, Kliff Kingsbury's Air Raid offense looked stale last season. There will be little margin for error for the coach in 2021, considering how heavily Arizona has invested in a win-now roster while third-year QB Kyler Murray is still on his inexpensive rookie contract. Defensive coordinator Vance Joseph did an admirable job with a shorthanded roster a year ago, and now that group has been fortified with the additions of free-agent end J.J. Watt and first-round inside linebacker Zaven Collins from Tulsa. □

PREDICTIONS

1 LOS ANGELES RAMS

BEST CASE
Stafford proves to be everything L.A. hoped for, allowing McVay to craft his most prolific attack ever. New WR DeSean Jackson reels in deep shots, and RB Darrell Henderson fills in ably for Cam Akers, who ruptured his Achilles in the offseason. The talented team goes all the way to Super Bowl LVI.

WORST CASE
Stafford's ability to make plays late in the down is what had McVay pining for him, but too often the 33-year-old QB ends up taking big hits. He limps through the stretch run, and the defense isn't as dominant without Staley calling the shots; the Rams make the playoffs but go out with a whimper.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD **13W 4L**

2 SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS

BEST CASE
Let's be clear: Health is the difference here, as the defense recaptures its 2019 form and Garoppolo plays well enough to hold off Lance. Not only do the 49ers make a Super Bowl return, but they also get a torrent of trade offers—which include first-round picks—for both of their QBs.

WORST CASE
The injury bug doesn't bite them as badly as it did a year ago, but the defense just isn't the same without Saleh. Garoppolo underwhelms and gives way to Lance, whose performance reflects his inexperience. The Niners go into the New Year fighting for their playoff lives.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD **11W 6L**

3 SEATTLE SEAHAWKS

BEST CASE
The Seahawks' defense isn't exactly a force, but it is improved over last year's No. 22–ranked unit. With Wilson and new coordinator Waldron clicking—the QB is helped by free-agent pickup TE Gerald Everett and surging WR DK Metcalf—Seattle finally gets back to the Super Bowl.

WORST CASE
Despite the addition of DE Kerry Hyder, Seattle still has no pass rush, which places a burden on the revamped secondary. Wilson does his thing, but shootouts aren't what the Seahawks do best. They miss the playoffs, setting up an offseason of questions about Wilson's future in Seattle.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD **9W 8L**

4 ARIZONA CARDINALS

BEST CASE
Kingsbury and Murray turn the Cardinals' offense into something beyond the college-style Air Raid it has been, and new WR A.J. Green plays like his old self. Meanwhile, Watt leads a dominant pass rush that consistently closes out opponents, putting Arizona back in the playoffs once more.

WORST CASE
It turns out the late-season struggles of 2020 were a harbinger of things to come. Murray can't create magic often enough to carry an offense that at first seemed revolutionary but is quickly becoming outdated, while the pass rush looks its age. Come January, the Cards head back to the drawing board.

PROJECTED 2021 RECORD **5W 12L**

WE MEET AGAIN AND AGAIN
There have been seven College Football Playoff tournaments—and Dabo Swinney and Nick Saban, the poster boys for this era's lack of parity, have faced off in four.

NFL FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2021

CFB

MONO

There are 130 FBS programs, but when it comes to national titles and top recruits an exclusive playground for **ALABAMA, CLEMSON** and a few other power

ME

by ROSS DELLENGER

photograph by AL TIELEMANS

OPOLY

there might as well be a half dozen. How did college football's playoff become houses? And can the chasm between them and everyone else be closed?

EN

▼ OHIO STATE *2014*

▲ ALABAMA *2011*

▼ FLORIDA STATE *2013*

▼ ALABAMA *2017*

▼ CLEMSON *2018*

▲ ALABAMA *2020*

▲ ALABAMA *2015*

▼ LSU *2019*

▼ ALABAMA *2012*

▼ CLEMSON *2016*

One of the greatest offensive minds in the history of college football happens to belong to one of the sport's most braggadocious men, and today Steve Spurrier is especially eager to crow. He waves a visitor into his cozy office in the bowels of the stadium with a field named in his honor on Florida's campus and kicks off the conversation with some playful boasting. A friend, he says, just told him about an interesting footnote to his iconic coaching career.

Did you know, he starts off, that the 1996 Gators, the Spurrier-coached group that went 12–1 and produced a Heisman Trophy quarterback, is the last first-time national champion in college football?

"That's been 25 years," the Head Ball Coach says through a smirk.

It's true. A quarter century has passed since we've seen a program win its first title, a startling drought that's just one more indicator of a trend that upstart schools from coast to coast are all too aware of: Parity is pretty much dead in college football. Since Florida announced itself as a national power, a small group of teams has done more than dominate the postseason—it has strangled any sense of competitive balance in the sport. Beginning in 1998, the first year of the BCS and the dawn of the era when national championships are decided on the field and not in the polls, six teams have combined to win 74% of the championships: Alabama (6), LSU (3), Clemson (2), Florida State (2), Florida (2) and Ohio State (2). In the last 23 years, just 17 teams have qualified for the 46 spots in championship games.

The Playoff era, which began with the 2014 season, has been even more exclusive. Four teams—Alabama, Clemson, Ohio State and Oklahoma—have accounted for 20 of the 28 playoff spots (71%), and the Tide, Tigers and Buckeyes have combined for 11 of the possible 14 championship game berths. Last season marked a new extreme in the imbalance of the sport. For the first time in the seven years of the Playoff, none of the four participants were making their first appearance in the four-team bracket.

The same teams are appearing so regularly that college football's executives proposed a 12-team playoff expansion model this summer, largely to inject new blood (and yes, even more revenue) into a stale system. Fans may be growing bored with the same old teams, too: Alabama's win over Ohio State in January drew the lowest title-game TV audience of the CFP era.

"I think it's a problem," says West Virginia coach Neal Brown. "It's a problem for our sport, and we've got to figure out solutions."

AS AN ASSISTANT coach with Notre Dame in the mid- to late 1980s, Barry Alvarez never once got turned down for a visit to a prospect's family home. "I could get into anyone's living room and have a legit chance to sign them," he says.

Then he took over as head coach at Wisconsin in 1990, and that all changed. "The big brands get the best kids," says Alvarez, now a special adviser to the Big Ten, "and when you're winning championships, that's where the best players want to go."

Recruiting is the lifeblood of college football, and it offers the most prominent example of how the sport's unofficial caste system of Have and Have-not programs has become a self-perpetuating parity destruction machine. If you have a rich championship tradition, you probably also have overflowing coffers, a large fan base and

ENCORE PERFORMANCES

A select cartel of programs has hoarded the last 10 national championships (opposite page): Bama has five, Clemson two and FSU, LSU and OSU one each.

BILL FRAKES (2011, 2012); ROBERT BECK (2013); GREG NELSON (2014); JOHN W. MCDONOUGH (2015, 2018); AL TIELEMANS (2016); KEVIN D. LILES (2017); DAVID E. KLUTHO (2019, 2020)

73

Percentage of the last 15 national titles won by SEC schools. Florida State (2013), Ohio State ('14), and Clemson ('16 and '18) are the only outliers.

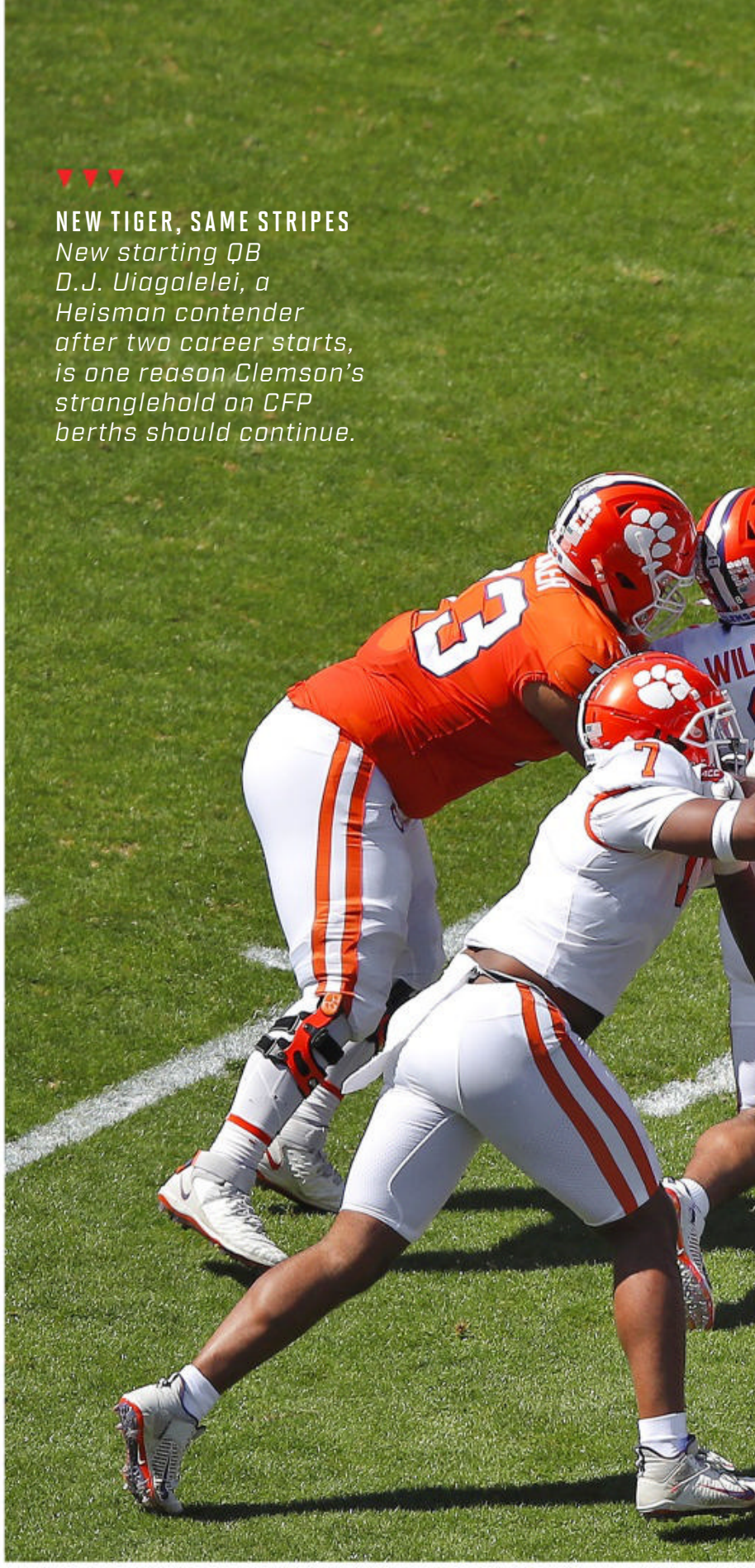
lavish facilities—all the better to impress top recruits who will help you add to that championship tradition.

Of those six teams that have won three-quarters of the national titles since 1998, five rank in the top 12 nationally in athletic department budgets, according to 2019 figures from *USA Today*. (Clemson is the outlier at No. 22.) And of those six schools, five are part of a group that has reeled in the best talent in the nation over the last decade. In a study from MaxPreps, seven programs have signed 55% of the five-star prospects since 2011. They include LSU, Alabama, Clemson, Florida State and Ohio State, as well as USC and Georgia.

Once, schools around the country could count on a reliable pipeline of talent from their own backyards, and even the biggest programs kept their focus local. (Bear Bryant's last Crimson Tide championship team, in 1979, featured 71 players from Alabama and just 37 from elsewhere, including none from Texas or California.) And if you're lucky enough to coach a school in the Southeast, you can still build a pretty good roster with regional talent. The SEC's 11-state footprint has produced 197 five-star prospects since 2011. The other 39 states have churned out 134. (Oklahoma, which has produced two five-star prospects in that span, will soon give the SEC a 12-state footprint.) The South's grip on college football and its talent pipelines has never been stronger. No wonder schools from Southeastern states have won 14 of the past 15 titles, the outlier being Ohio State.

But thanks to years of postseason visibility, massive social media followings and bottomless budgets, big-brand schools are making the recruiting gap between the Haves and Have-nots even wider. For a select few programs, the entire country is now the backyard. For instance, the Crimson Tide's last two signing classes have featured 13 players from the state of Alabama and a combined 20 players from Florida and Texas. The Tide got three players from Maryland and three more from California. Its national reach has helped Bama build the country's No. 1 recruiting class in nine of the last 11 years.

"It's almost unfair," says Spurrier. "At Alabama it's like being in the NFL, winning the Super Bowl and every year getting the first 10 picks in the first round."



NEW TIGER, SAME STRIPES *New starting QB D.J. Uiagalelei, a Heisman contender after two career starts, is one reason Clemson's stranglehold on CFP berths should continue.*

It's a cycle that is choking meaningful competition. "If you win a championship in the NFL, you're picking last," says Stanford coach David Shaw. "If you win the championship in college football, you're picking first. There's nothing that helps the people in the middle get to the top."

SO, TODAY'S BLUEBLOOD programs are stronger, richer and more powerful than ever. But despite what Shaw says, there are a *few* factors that could help level the playing field.

TODD KIRKLAND/GETTY IMAGES

• **THE TRANSFER PORTAL** Players can now transfer and play for a new team immediately, making it easier for talent to spread. A school that is one or two pieces short of a championship-caliber team can dip into the transfer portal, sign a player and immediately plug him into the hole.

• **CLEVER SCHEMES** On its own, offensive innovation can spark a charge at the big boys. "Scheme can close the gap with the Haves," says Gerry DiNardo, the Big Ten Network analyst who was offensive coordinator for the Colorado team that won the 1990 championship, one of the last nontraditional football powers to win it all. They recruited well and were stocked with future NFL talent, but the Buffaloes also developed an exotic

Here Comes
A REGULAR

College's football's four-team playoff system is seven years old—and if the seasons and brackets seem like they all run together, there's a reason. Just four teams have filled 71% of the 28 available postseason berths.

TEAM	CFP APPEARANCES
Alabama	6
Clemson	6
Ohio State	4
Oklahoma	4
126 remaining FBS schools	8

offense by meshing the I-formation with the Wishbone option. The I-Bone powered them to that 11–1 season.

But since then, the Buffs have won two conference titles in 31 years. It's a familiar pattern: Just in the 2000s, see West Virginia under Rich Rodriguez and then Baylor under Art Briles and Oregon under Chip Kelly. "There's a chance a Have-not can break through, but they won't sustain it," DiNardo says.

• COMMITTED COACHES One reason for DiNardo's skepticism about sustainability: Innovative coaches who turn middling programs into winners often bolt for bigger jobs. But long-term program success is connected to consistency at the top. Only 10 coaches in major college football have coached at their respective schools for at least 10 years, including Saban (15 years) and Dabo Swinney (14 years).

Baylor coach Dave Aranda believes one of his Big 12 rivals, Iowa State, is on course for a program breakthrough based on its coaching consistency. "There have been teams that have shown the ability to contend, but the coaches leave after their success," Aranda says. "The ability to do it and build and build, I think, is uncommon. Matt Campbell is doing it now. "

Now entering his sixth season leading the Cyclones, Campbell has turned down high-profile jobs to remain in Ames and continue building Iowa State. This past offseason, he said no to a $68 million offer from the Detroit Lions, and in previous years he's been linked to openings at several high-profile schools. Along the way he has led the Cyclones to four straight bowl games—a program first—including a win over Oregon in the Fiesta Bowl last January. Iowa State was No. 9 in the final AP poll, its highest finish ever, and in 2019 and 2020 it broke into the top 50 recruiting class rankings. "You're always trying to figure out: How do you find consistency?" Campbell says. "To be quite honest, you're in an uphill climb."

"It's almost unfair," says Spurrier of top programs' recruiting advantages. "At Alabama it's like being in the NFL, winning the Super Bowl and every year **GETTING THE FIRST 10 PICKS** in the first round."

• AN EXPANDED POSTSEASON Oregon coach Mario Cristobal, a former Saban assistant, believes he's identified the recipe for success in college football: (1) recruit well; (2) develop players; and (3) use those players appropriately. "That's how Clemson got so successful, right? That's how it works," he says. "That's the blueprint proven over time."

Sometimes it takes a little luck, too: Two years ago, Oregon finished 12–2 but fell a field goal short of a likely spot in the four-team playoff. Plenty of programs have been one play from the promised land in the Playoff era. How could anyone forget Big 12 cochampions TCU and Baylor, both 11–1, being left out of the 2014 playoff? In '15, Stanford and Iowa were just on the outside looking in. Last year it was one-loss Texas A&M and undefeated Cincinnati.

In June, the College Football Playoff Board of Managers

ADAM CAIRNS/COLUMBUS DISPATCH/USA TODAY NETWORK (TUIMOLOAU); RICHARD RODRIGUEZ/GETTY IMAGES (CAMPBELL)

approved a feasibility study for an expanded, 12-team playoff system that would include six major-conference champions and six at-large teams. Broadening the postseason might help teams outside of the Bama-Clemson–Ohio State–Oklahoma axis break through. "When's the last time you saw a school become a new brand in football?" asks Notre Dame AD Jack Swarbrick, who was part of the committee that formed the expanded playoff proposal that will be studied. "We've seen Gonzaga become a brand in college basketball. Football is such a high-resource sport. There's such a high investment to get to that level. The commitment you have to make is hard for universities."

The only way to create that investment is to build the kind of program profile that comes with national titles, or at least regular postseason exposure. "To crack the code to create parity, you've got to get into the playoff, and you've got to win," new Texas coach Steve Sarkisian says.

There are more far-fetched ideas for creating parity. Some have suggested limiting college programs to a certain number of four- and five-star recruits. Others say the NCAA should reduce scholarships from 85 to 70 to disperse more talent across the country. Kyle Wittingham, the longtime coach at Utah, believes parity can be achieved only if a 30- or 40-team superleague forms with equal revenue distribution to all members. (The SEC, with its plans to add Oklahoma and Texas, may be heading down that path.)

Until that happens, coaches outside of college football's power circles are relying on the tool that has rallied programs and fans throughout the game's history: hope. "I do believe there's enough wins for everybody," says Baylor's Aranda. "Instead of trying to be like those [blueblood] teams, be who you are and make your place unique and reflective of you so that it becomes important to other people."

In the meantime, turn to page 68 for SI's Top 20. The teams at the top might sound familiar. □

Drawing POWER

Once, recruiting was a local game: Schools could count on getting the best prospects in their own backyards. Now, a few power programs have national reach. According to a study by MaxPreps, of the 331 five-star recruits (like **Ohio State freshman defensive end J.T. Tuimoloau**) over the last decade, 181, or 55%, have landed with just seven schools.

SCHOOL	5-STAR RECRUITS	NO. OF STATES	TOP STATE
Alabama	44	13	Florida (13)
Georgia	34	11	Georgia (17)
Ohio State	26	9	Ohio (6)
Clemson	20	10	Georgia (5)
USC	19	7	California (12)
Florida St	19	8	Florida (8)
LSU	19	6	Louisiana (11)

THE LONG HAUL

Campbell's commitment to program-building at Iowa State is a rarity among coaches—and it's why the Cyclones have moved closer to CFP contention.

LET'S MAKE A DEAL

The newest front in the college football recruiting wars isn't fancy facilities or playing time or can line up the best **NAME, IMAGE AND LIKENESS** opportunities for players. And right

proud traditions. It's which schools now, anything goes

NFL FOOTBALL PREVIEW CFB

by
ROSS DELLENGER

illustration by
THE SPORTING PRESS

IN BATON ROUGE, inside the club level of LSU's colossal football stadium, coach Ed Orgeron delivered a message in late July to hundreds of influential businesspeople gathered to hear him discuss the 2021 Tigers.

His message was something no coach would have uttered publicly six months ago. "We're paying players now: name, image and likeness," he said. "So if you guys wanna start paying our players, you can go ahead!"

A week earlier in San Antonio, speaking at the state's annual high school coaches convention, Alabama coach Nick Saban told a crowd of thousands that his sophomore quarterback, Bryce Young, who hadn't yet started a single game, was approaching $1 million worth of endorsements.

In Columbus, the nation's top prospect for 2022, quarterback Quinn Ewers, arrived at Ohio State after skipping his senior season at Carroll High in Southlake, Texas, so he could immediately start earning endorsements.

And in Miami, a Hurricanes supporter promised each scholarship football player a monthly check of $500 if they endorsed his business, a chain of mixed martial arts gyms.

Indeed, a new era in college football is upon us. Now more than ever—or at least now more transparently than ever—the competition on the field will be decided by which programs are best able to help their players cash in off it.

"It [will be] a $1 billion–a-year industry, at least," says Blake Lawrence, the CEO and founder of Opendorse, a sports tech company that helps match players with name, image and likeness (NIL) opportunities. "It's coming and it's going to be huge."

In just a few months, NIL has altered the college sports landscape, disrupting a

foundation of (nominal) amateurism that had stood for a century. While athletes are benefiting, administrators and coaches are scrambling to understand the concept, regulate it and use it to their own advantage.

THE FIRST THING to understand about NIL is that nobody fully understands NIL. For decades, college athletes were not allowed to profit off their images. Then, last year, a patchwork of states began passing laws—all somewhat different from each other—mandating that they be permitted to. The NCAA urged Congress to pass a uniform set of rules, but no such help was forthcoming. And so, with the state laws about to go into effect, the NCAA threw the doors wide open, saying that, effective July 1, all athletes could benefit from their name, image and likeness. As if begging Congress to come to its regulatory rescue, the NCAA kept the rules vague: It has released guidelines stating only that schools cannot facilitate NIL ventures for athletes and that athletes cannot strike deals that are built around pay-for-play. Everything else is up to interpretation.

The Trojans signed the seventh-ranked recruiting class this past year, according to 247Sports' composite list. "A big piece of it was NIL," says USC director of player personnel **SPENCER HARRIS,** who oversees the program's 30-minute NIL pitch to prospects.

Some schools are operating under state laws that mandate additional rules. For instance, states like Texas and South Carolina specifically bar athletes from using their school's marks in NIL deals. Other states' laws don't address the issue. Meanwhile, schools operating in states without laws get to make up their own playbooks (and, as we'll see, whether to allow athletes to use those school marks is among the most consequential decisions they face).

Midnight on July 1 was met with a flurry of deals. Since then, overwhelmed school compliance staffs have been fielding up to 200 inquiries from players per day.

Between the NCAA's hands-off approach and a lack of clarity around how state laws will be enforced, the schools are policing themselves. Creative interpretation of the NCAA guidelines is not only expected, but it's also already happening. And it's not difficult. As long as there is a documented exchange between an athlete and a business, it passes muster for not being facilitated by the school. If a restaurant wants to give an offensive lineman free meals for a year for tweeting an endorsement, it's fine. If a local shoe store wants to pay a quarterback $10,000 a year to wear its cleats once, it's cool.

"It's pretty much a free-for-all," says Tom McMillen, the CEO of Lead1, which represents the athletic directors of the Football Bowl Subdivision.

For years, most coaches fought against allowing athletes to be compensated for their likeness—an American right that every other college student holds. Now they have suddenly joined the chorus of change, crowing about their players' deals, honing recruiting pitches and, some of them at least, publicly encouraging their supporters to pony up.

After all, NIL has evolved into the newest snazzy tool to woo young athletes, another question for recruits to ask.

How grand are your facilities?

How storied is your football tradition?

How many players do you send to the NFL?

How much money can I earn at your school?

"We use it," says USC coach Clay Helton. "We have a presentation we do in recruiting to be able to show the advantages of being in a market like L.A."

The Trojans signed the seventh-ranked recruiting class this past year, according to 247Sports' composite list.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: MATT CASHORE/GETTY IMAGES (STADIUM); ANDY NELSON/THE REGISTER GUARD/USA TODAY NETWORK (OREGON); BRETT ROJO/USA TODAY SPORTS (ARKANSAS); JEFF BLAKE/USA TODAY SPORTS (AUBURN); JOSH MORGAN/USA TODAY SPORTS (CLEMSON); DOUGLAS DEFELICE/USA TODAY SPORTS (MIAMI)

KENT GIDLEY/COLLEGIATE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

"A big piece of it was NIL," says USC director of player personnel Spencer Harris, who oversees the program's 30-minute NIL pitch to prospects. "It's a part of every recruiting conversation at every school."

Athletes are cashing in at a rate that even experts didn't expect. Lawrence believes the enterprise will exceed $1.5 billion annually if all athletes were to participate. He estimates that just 10% of college athletes did so in NIL's first month.

For now, football is king. While most NIL transactions are in the double or triple figures, big-money deals from the top percentiles are inflating averages. For example, in July, the average transaction on INFLCR, one of the largest NIL platforms, was $923. Yet the median deal was for a mere $25, says Jim Cavale, INFLCR's CEO.

A similar disparity exists in total NIL compensation. One unnamed athlete made $210,000 in July from their NIL ventures struck on Opendorse. However, the average Division I athlete on the platform in July made $471, and the monthly median figure was just $35.

On Opendorse, the most-used avenue for NIL is social media promotions, accounting for 88.5% of all transaction activity but just 46% of total money. That's because nearly one-third of NIL revenue was derived from companies using a player's likeness in endorsement or commercials. By sport, football players made up 79% of the NIL market shares on the platform, followed by men's basketball (9.6%) and women's volleyball (5.5%).

Those numbers paint only a partial picture. While Opendorse and INFLCR combined to cover more than 4,000 college athletes, thousands more are sprinkled across a bevy of smaller, more local digital marketplaces. There's another group, too: Athletes with enough cachet have hired reps to help them strike bigger deals.

More than 100 college football players have signed with marketing agents or agencies, says Darren Heitner, a Florida-based sports lawyer and himself counsel for some college athletes. "Many new agencies have sprouted up. All of a sudden they're becoming licensed—or not—and signing up players," he says.

The majority of NIL deals feature a small payment for an athlete's endorsement on social media. Wright's Barbecue in Johnson, Ark., for example, struck deals with several Razorbacks linemen. As the 6' 9", 330-pound tackle Dalton Wagner tweeted, "No one knows quality BBQ like an OLineman!" Some brands have targeted quantity, striking agreements with thousands of athletes across a variety of sports. For example, Barstool Sports offered $100 of free apparel for any athlete who added the company's name to their social media bio. According to Lawrence, more than 130,000 athletes have participated.

However, small-dollar deals aren't going to move the recruiting needle. So what is? Experts say three things are emerging in the NIL universe that could impact the recruiting landscape: (1) colicensing; (2) group licensing; and (3) community participation.

Colicensing entails schools granting permission to use their institutional marks, such as logos, emblems and color schemes. Some schools are barred by state law, but most are working on a case-by-case basis. Schools don't make money here, but they allow a player to, say, wear his jersey in a car dealership ad to make himself more identifiable.

Some schools are going a step further, essentially becoming business partners with their players so that both sides profit: That's group licensing, a strategy that, for instance, allows both schools and players to make money from jersey sales that—finally—feature players' names.

Those schools are ahead of the game, says Casey Schwab, an ex–NFL Players Association executive and the CEO of Altius, an NIL consulting company. "It's one thing to say as a school that you support athletes in NIL deals," Schwab says. "They are putting their money where their mouth is."

MILLION-DOLLAR ARM

Earlier this summer Saban said sophomore quarterback Young (above, 9), had already reeled in "almost seven figures" in endorsement deals.

Ohio State, Alabama and North Carolina became three of the first programs to partner with a third party, the Brandr Group, a brand management and licensing agency, in a three-way deal that allows athletes to earn compensation from jerseys and other merchandise outfitted with school logos and their names or likenesses.

Syracuse partnered with star guard Buddy Boeheim, son of legendary coach Jim, on apparel that features his own personal logo—a silhouette of Buddy, midshot—accompanied by the school's block S. The reveal of the apparel shook administrators who are apprehensive about athletes using school marks because they believe the practice will impact their contracts with trademark licensing companies that pay schools millions annually for the right to those marks. "Some universities are scared of it," says Syracuse director of compliance Mark Wheeler, who helped orchestrate Boeheim's deal. "We viewed it as more of a positive."

Syracuse deputy athletic director Andrew Goodrich says that he already hears prospects asking the question: *Will I be able to use school marks?* The issue is big enough for athletes that in August, Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh brought the chairman of the school's board of regents to practice to inform players that they could, in fact, use UM's block M logo in their own commercial transactions. In a video posted on social media, the team roared its approval.

Dan Gale, president of the college athletics consulting firm Leona Marketing Group, says the first few weeks of NIL have shown that 99% of college athletes don't possess a strong enough brand to strike significant deals. They need the school's marks to elevate their NIL futures.

But schools are all over the map, says INFLCR's Cavale. "You have schools granting the marks and other schools that don't want them even using the colors," he says.

At many schools, athletes donning school logos are participating in NIL activities without seeking permission. School licensing companies, which thought *they* had exclusive rights to those logos, have even intervened, requesting that the material be removed. It's a complicated issue, but whoever figures out the process best will hand to their coaches recruiting "talking points," says Schwab.

Some coaches already seem prepared. With his statement in late July, Orgeron may have jump-started NIL movement from his local businesses.

The biggest NIL advantage isn't necessarily in a school's size and tradition, but the participation of its business community, says Henry Hays, founder and chairman of MatchPoint Connection, a digital marketplace based in Baton Rouge. "Does this just benefit the big schools? I'm not sure that's right," Hays says. "If you have a school with less resources but their community is set up to have

DOUGLAS DEFELICE/USA TODAY SPORTS

NIL

MONEY PLAYS

Players like Miami QB D'Eriq King *(above)* are cashing in on multiple deals. Here are some of the notable ones that have landed so far.

PLAYER SCHOOL POSITION	ENDORSEMENT
D'Eriq King *Miami QB*	Florida Panthers
Trey Knox *Arkansas WR*	PetSmart
Bo Nix *Auburn QB*	Milo's Tea Company
Kayvon Thibodeaux *Oregon DE*	Nike
D.J. Uiagalelei *Clemson QB*	Dr Pepper
Brock Vandagriff *Georgia QB*	Onward Reserve
Bryce Young *Alabama QB*	Cash App

these discussions, they're in a better spot."

Dan Morgan, an Orlando-based lawyer and NBA agent who has also served as an adviser for college athletes, says he's already learned about schools strongly encouraging their boosters to purchase their athletes' Cameo spots or buy apparel.

But there are bigger plans afoot: Remember the Miami gym owner promising to give each Hurricanes player $500? That deal alone has already rattled enough cages that one industry executive expects supporters of other programs to return fire. He says boosters elsewhere have suggested paying their schools' athletes not $500 monthly, but $5,000. Already, Built Brands, a protein bar company in Utah, offered $1,000 annual endorsement deals to each BYU scholarship football player, while also striking deals with walk-ons for amounts that cover their tuition.

The man behind the Miami gym offer, Dan Lambert, has also started a company whose sole purpose is raising money from fans—say through a ticketed party or event—and then donating that money to local businesses willing to use it to hire Miami athletes as endorsers. And if Lambert's new company proves successful, it is sure to inspire others. His plan seems to be in accordance with Florida's NIL law, and he says he cleared it with Miami.

"What's the downside in being aggressive here?" McMillen asks. "You can speed down the highway and not get pulled over."

One agent told SPORTS ILLUSTRATED that he has advised his coaching clients to facilitate NIL contracts for athletes and recruits with local businesses. That technically could run afoul of the NCAA guidelines, but who's to stop them?

AMONG COACHES, the lack of clear rules is a concern, says Todd Berry, the executive director of the American Football Coaches Association. He believes college football is headed toward a place it's already been—the scandal-ridden, rule-breaking days of the 1970s and '80s.

"It's going to come down to an arms race on how much money you can raise to pay players," says Berry. (This is, of course, good for players.)

Coaches are even poking one another publicly over NIL recruiting tactics. In late July, Stanford coach David Shaw made pointed comments about Saban's address at the Texas high school coaches association, suggesting it was nothing more than a recruiting maneuver.

"It wasn't accidental," Shaw says. "Many of us around college football shrugged our shoulders and said, 'Is this really what we want to be doing?' "

In the meantime, those within the NIL industry chalk up another win for Saban's Tuscaloosa-based dynasty.

"Alabama got an early NIL lead, as if it needed it," says Heitner.

Another issue arising: Lawrence estimates that only half the national NIL transactions are being disclosed to schools, one of the only requirements of athletes.

It's another speed bump that could be smoothed out with congressional action, some believe. On Capitol Hill, Representative Colin Allred (D., Texas), a former Baylor football player, says lawmakers are hearing from their state university administrators about the imbalance across the country. From the lack of enforcement to the issues with boosters, athletic officials are loudly encouraging Congress members—after previous failed attempts—to pass legislation that would provide a universal policy and an enforcement arm.

Allred believes a national standard will eventually pass, but it could be next year. "Everybody is looking at the recruiting impact of this and the role boosters will play in this. That's a big concern," he says.

A federal standard could help solve two other lingering issues. There is uncertainty around both the NIL rights of high school athletes and international college athletes. Most high school associations have not yet allowed prep stars to profit from NIL. International college athletes on student visas are not allowed to earn compensation.

Meanwhile, some of the biggest brands in the country—Gatorade, McDonald's, Degree deodorant and Pepsi—are expected to begin creeping into the NIL space soon. While Nike agreed to a reported six-figure memorabilia deal with Oregon edge rusher Kayvon Thibodeaux, no other household brands had entered the NIL arena in its first six weeks, until Aug. 11, when Clemson quarterback D.J. Uiagalelei struck a deal with Dr Pepper to star in the company's latest national college football ad campaign (sans official orange jersey, of course).

He's believed to be the first college football player to be featured in a national television commercial in the NIL era, a point likely to be repeated frequently by Clemson coaches on the recruiting trail.

"In two to three years, I think it's going to gain real traction," says Syracuse's Buddy Boeheim. "For some colleges, there's a huge market. Down the road, it can really blow up. Who knows where it can lead to?" □

IRONCLAD
Bama lost five first-rounders from an offense that was second in the nation in scoring, but John Metchie III, who had two of his six TD receptions against Auburn, is one of many weapons at Saban's disposal.

SCOUTING

Last season was like none we've ever seen before. But after all the cancellations and uncancellations, the result was familiar: The **CRIMSON TIDE** were champs. The draft hit hard, but coach Nick Saban did what he always does: reload. Under (hopefully) better circumstances, Alabama is our pick to raise yet another trophy, in Indianapolis on Jan. 10.

NFL FOOTBALL PREVIEW 2021 CFB

SI PREDICTIONS

SEMIFINAL		SEMIFINAL
1 ALABAMA	ALABAMA	OHIO STATE 2
	VS.	
4 CLEMSON	OHIO STATE	GEORGIA 3

NATIONAL CHAMPION

ALABAMA CRIMSON TIDE

PHOTOGRAPH BY **UA ATHLETICS/COLLEGIATE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES**

REPORTS

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 4TH DEFENSE 32ND FINAL AP POLL 1ST

1

ALABAMA

BIG PICTURE Alabama won its sixth title in 12 seasons last year—then saw its offense picked apart, with its quarterback, top running back, two receivers (including Heisman winner DeVonta Smith) and a tackle all taken in the first round of the NFL draft.

BIG QUESTION Can the Crimson Tide weather their massive turnover? Offensive coordinator Steve Sarkisian is now the head coach at Texas, and three other offensive assistants left Tuscaloosa after last season as well. The new coordinator is Bill O'Brien, who spent the past six-plus seasons as the head coach of the Houston Texans. The cupboard is not totally bare: Junior John Metchie, who hauled in 55 passes and six touchdowns in 2020 while showcasing game-breaking speed, looks like he will be the next great Bama receiver. The guy throwing him the ball will be 20-year-old sophomore **Bryce Young**, who reminds some of former Tide star Jalen Hurts with his dual-threat skills.

BIG DAY *Oct. 9 at Texas A&M.* Bama's trip to College Station is the biggest land mine on its schedule, as A&M—led by outstanding defensive lineman DeMarvin Leal—was ninth nationwide last year in total defense. *—Michael Shapiro*

BIG NUMBER

13

Consecutive drafts in which Bama has had a player selected in the first round, one short of the all-time record, held by Miami (1995–2008).

2

OHIO STATE

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 7TH DEFENSE 59TH FINAL AP POLL 2ND

BIG PICTURE The Buckeyes made the College Football Playoff for the third time in five years—and came up short for the third time, losing to Alabama 52–24 in the title game.

BIG QUESTION Who will be their quarterback? Last year's starter, Justin Fields, was taken in the first round by the Chicago Bears, leaving coach Ryan Day to decide among true freshman Kyle McCord and redshirt freshmen C.J. Stroud and Jack Miller III—none of whom has ever thrown a pass in college. The good news is that whoever wins the job will be operating behind a strong offensive line and throwing to what is arguably the best wide receiver combo in the entire country. **Chris Olave**, who was 12th in the nation with 104.1 receiving yards per game, surprisingly opted to return for his senior season, saying he wanted to get physically stronger. He'll pair with sophomore Garrett Wilson, who was 28th in the nation with 90.4 receiving yards per game.

BIG DAY *Sept. 11 vs. Oregon.* The Buckeyes lost six starters from a defense that was mediocre to begin with. The new unit will face a major test in its Week 2 showdown with the Ducks. *—Lila Bromberg*

BIG NUMBER

0

Number of times the Buckeyes had two WRs with 100 yards each in back-to-back games, before Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson did it twice last year.

KENT GIDLEY/COLLEGIATE IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES (YOUNG); RUSSELL COSTANZA/USA TODAY SPORTS (OLAVE)

3

GEORGIA

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 41ST DEFENSE 12TH FINAL AP POLL 7TH

JAY BIGGERSTAFF/USA TODAY SPORTS (DANIELS); KIRBY LEE/USA TODAY SPORTS (ROSS)

BIG PICTURE After three straight SEC championship game appearances, in 2020 the Bulldogs finished second in the East behind Florida, which hammered them 44–28 at the World's Largest Outdoor Cocktail Party. Don't be surprised if Georgia, which traditionally has a strong defense, leans heavily on its offense in '21.

BIG QUESTION Has the secondary reloaded? Georgia's four leading defensive backs heard their names called in the 2021 NFL draft. The Bulldogs have plenty of raw talent, from 2020 top cornerback prospect Kelee Ringo and Clemson transfer Derion Kendrick to fifth-year senior Ameer Speed and West Virginia transfer Tykee Smith. If the Bulldogs do find themselves in shootouts this year, they should have the offense to keep up. Junior quarterback **JT Daniels** made his debut late last year after recovering from an ACL tear, breathing life back into a moribund offense. The USC transfer threw for 1,231 yards in four games.

BIG DAY *Sept. 4 at Clemson.* The Dawgs begin the season with a huge prime-time showdown in Charlotte. This is one of Georgia's only two meetings with a preseason top-25 team (the other is No. 18 Florida on Oct. 30). *—Augusta Stone*

BIG NUMBER

103

Improvement in passing yards per game (207.5 to 310.8) after JT Daniels took over as starter from Stetson Bennett on Nov. 21.

4

CLEMSON

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 10TH DEFENSE 15TH FINAL AP POLL 3RD

BIG PICTURE The Trevor Lawrence era is over. His three-year run featured a national championship and as many College Football Playoff appearances as losses. Now, sophomore D.J. Uiagalelei takes over for the Tigers, who welcome back 10 starters from a top-25 defense.

BIG QUESTION It's the obvious one: Can Uiagalelei succeed Lawrence? The sophomore made two starts last year while Lawrence was out with COVID-19. One was a narrow win over a middling Boston College team and the other a double-overtime heartbreaker loss against Notre Dame. It's a small sample size, and Uiagalelei played well, completing 69.4% of his passes and averaging 390.5 yards. But one career loss for Uiagalelei is already half that of Lawrence's career total, and that's the standard at Clemson now, fair or not. To make things trickier: The Tigers also lost their top three pass catchers of 2020. But they get back senior **Justyn Ross**, who led Clemson with 66 catches two years ago but missed all of last season after spinal surgery.

BIG DAY *Sept. 4 vs. Georgia.* The ballyhooed prime-time season opener against the Bulldogs stands out as the toughest game on the Tigers' schedule. *—Kyle Wood*

BIG NUMBER

65

Career wins for the five Clemson players, including LB James Skalski, who will, owing to COVID-19 allowances, return for a sixth season.

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 11TH DEFENSE 29TH FINAL AP POLL 6TH

5

OKLAHOMA

BIG PICTURE Another year, another potential Heisman Trophy in Norman. Sophomore quarterback **Spencer Rattler** could follow Baker Mayfield and Kyler Murray and become the third Sooner in five years to win the award. Rattler tossed 28 touchdowns in 11 starts last season, and he will have better weapons at his disposal this year.

BIG QUESTION Can Oklahoma's defense rise to the level of its offense? Coach Lincoln Riley has built an offensive machine in his four seasons in charge, twice leading the nation in total offense. Now the defense appears to be on the way up. Under second-year coordinator Alex Grinch, the unit ranked 29th nationally, easily its best showing during Riley's tenure. The defense could be even better this year, and it will be led by linebacker Nik Bonitto, a redshirt junior who was ranked first nationally among edge rushers by *Pro Football Focus* in pressure rate and overall pass-rush grade.

BIG DAY *Nov. 27 at Oklahoma State*. With no real threat looming on their nonconference slate, the Sooners could well be undefeated when they arrive in Stillwater to take on the Cowboys. Talk about Bedlam. —M.S.

BIG NUMBER

772

Rushing yards by junior transfer Eric Gray on 157 carries last season, which led his former school, Tennessee. He also had 30 receptions.

6

CINCINNATI

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 24TH DEFENSE 13TH FINAL AP POLL 8TH

TIM HEITMAN/USA TODAY SPORTS (RATTLER); DALE ZANINE/USA TODAY SPORTS (RIDDER)

BIG PICTURE The Bearcats entered the last few weeks of the 2020 season as the Group of 5's Cinderella, but late COVID-19 cancellations and a scare in the AAC championship game against Tulsa kept them out of the College Football Playoff.

BIG QUESTION Can the defense recover from the loss of defensive coordinator Marcus Freeman to Notre Dame? While star quarterback **Desmond Ridder** was the driving force for the Cincinnati offense, the real key to last year's conference championship run was the Bearcats' defense, which ranked fourth in the country in yards allowed per play (4.57). Coach Luke Fickell replaced Freeman with former Michigan State assistant Mike Tressel, whose only previous stint as DC ended when he was demoted after two years in that position with the Spartans. Tressel inherits one of the best pass defenses in the country, featuring a pair of preseason All-America corners: junior Ahmad "Sauce" Gardner and grad student Coby Bryant.

BIG DAY *Oct. 2 at Notre Dame.* The Bearcats will face off against Freeman when they travel to South Bend. The Irish won the only previous meeting between the schools 58–0, in 1900. —*Marcus Krum*

BIG NUMBER

20

Consecutive games in which Cincinnati has forced a turnover, the longest active streak in the FBS. In 2020 the Bearcats had an impressive 16 INTs.

7

IOWA STATE

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 34TH DEFENSE 21ST FINAL AP POLL 9TH

SARAH PHIPPS/USA TODAY SPORTS (ROSE); JEFF HANISCH/USA TODAY SPORTS (MERTZ)

BIG PICTURE The Cyclones' last season was likely the best in program history. Matt Campbell's squad topped Oregon in the Fiesta Bowl and was ranked ninth in the final AP poll (the school's highest finish ever). With All-America junior running back Breece Hall (1,572 yards rushing), senior QB Brock Purdy (2,750 yards passing) and the entire offensive line returning, Iowa State could challenge Oklahoma for the Big 12 title.

BIG QUESTION How long can Iowa State hang on to Campbell? The sixth-year head coach turned down a reported eight-year, $68.5 million deal from the Detroit Lions in the offseason and signed an extension keeping him in Ames through 2028. But if the Cyclones are as good as they look to be, the NFL will likely come calling again. Campbell's offense is set with the crafty Hall, a Heisman candidate. Defensively, the line could be shaky, with both starting tackles transferring and all-conference end JaQuan Bailey now in the NFL. But Campbell does have senior linebacker **Mike Rose,** the reigning Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year.

BIG DAY *Nov. 20 at Oklahoma.* Any CFP hopes hinge on a win over the Sooners in Norman. Enough said. —M.S.

BIG NUMBER

1

Times Iowa State has stood alone atop the final regular-season standings in 113 years of conference play, after doing so in 2020.

8

WISCONSIN

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 103RD DEFENSE 5TH FINAL AP POLL UNRANKED

BIG PICTURE Things were looking up for Wisconsin after it demolished Illinois 45–7 in the 2020 opener, but then COVID-19 gutted the Badgers. The offense was especially hard hit, and it showed, as Wisconsin averaged its fewest yards (345.6) and points (25.1) per game since '04.

BIG QUESTION Will the ground game rebound? What has usually been a strength for Wisconsin teams was a clear weakness last season as the team ran for a paltry 3.9 yards per attempt. Jalen Berger emerged as the starter as a true freshman, but he played in only four games and never carried more than 15 times. Berger also missed a substantial portion of spring practice with a leg injury. The Badgers did add Clemson transfer Chez Mellusi (71 career carries), and they'll need him to contribute. Quarterback **Graham Mertz** struggled during a COVID-19-interrupted freshman season, throwing four touchdowns and five interceptions in his last six games.

BIG DAY *Sept. 25 vs. Notre Dame.* For the first time since 1964 the Badgers will face the Irish—who will likely have Wisconsin transfer Jack Coan starting under center. —L.B.

BIG NUMBER

2

Rushing TDs allowed in 2020 by Wisconsin's defense, which was led by inside linebacker Jack Sanborn, a senior this year.

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 46TH DEFENSE 40TH FINAL AP POLL 21ST

9

USC

BIG PICTURE Clay Helton enters what feels like a make-or-break season after guiding the Trojans to an 18–13 record over the past three years. USC has top-end talent yet couldn't find consistency in 2020 against a middling schedule, and needed late comebacks to beat Arizona State, Arizona and UCLA.

BIG QUESTION Can the Trojans keep **Kedon Slovis** on his feet? The QB put up good numbers as a sophomore (29.5 completions per game, best in the nation), but he wasn't as efficient as he was as a freshman. Part of the problem was an offensive line that allowed Slovis to be sacked 15 times in six games, tied for the most in the conference. Four of last year's starters on the line are back, but it will miss guard Alijah Vera-Tucker, selected 14th by the New York Jets. USC ranked last in the Pac-12 in rushing yards per game (97.3) and yards per attempt (3.0), so Helton has brought in two running back transfers, senior Keaontay Ingram (Texas) and sophomore Darwin Barlow (TCU).

BIG DAY *Oct. 23 at Notre Dame.* USC doesn't have Oregon or Washington on its schedule this year, and the Trojans will have a week off before traveling to South Bend. —*Nick Selbe*

BIG NUMBER

29

Age of punter Ben Griffiths, who played eight seasons of Australian Rules football. He averaged 46.4 yards per kick in 2020.

10

TEXAS A&M

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 33RD DEFENSE 9TH FINAL AP POLL 4TH

BIG PICTURE Texas A&M went 9–1 with an Orange Bowl victory against North Carolina, and its sole loss came to eventual national champion Alabama. However, the Aggies lost four-year starting quarterback Kellen Mond.

BIG QUESTION Who will succeed Mond? The competition is wide open, with redshirt freshman Haynes King and redshirt sophomore Zach Calzada as the two leading candidates. Both have little college experience: King appeared in two games last season and threw six passes; Calzada hasn't seen the field since 2019, when he threw five passes in three games. The good news is that the Aggies have solid receivers (led by junior tight end Jalen Wydermyer) and an all-conference back (junior Isaiah Spiller). Less encouraging: The offensive line lost four of its five starters. The defense should be fine, as the Aggies, anchored by junior end **DeMarvin Leal**, have 10 players back from a unit that led the SEC in total defense.

BIG DAY *Oct. 9 vs. Alabama.* Texas A&M lucked out with its SEC East opponents in 2021 (Missouri and South Carolina instead of Georgia or Florida), but to win the SEC championship, the Aggies will have to handle the Tide. —A.S.

BIG NUMBER

1

Kellen Mond's position on the Aggies' career list for passing yards, TDs, completions and total offense. He will be a tough act to follow.

RON CHENOY/USA TODAY SPORTS (SLOVIS); MICHAEL REAVES/GETTY IMAGES (LEAL)

11

NOTRE DAME

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 26TH DEFENSE 25TH FINAL AP POLL 5TH

ROBIN ALAM/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (HAMILTON); ED RUVALCABA/IOS/AP (KIRKLAND)

BIG PICTURE For the second time in three years, Notre Dame qualified for the College Football Playoff. But with a 31–14 Rose Bowl loss to Alabama, quarterback Ian Book's career in South Bend came to an end. Also gone are Butkus Award winner Jeremiah Owusu-Koramoah and most of the offensive line. While All-America safety **Kyle Hamilton** does return, this season will test coach Brian Kelly's roster-building acumen.

BIG QUESTION Can the Irish fill the holes in their O-line? Three 2020 starters were taken in the first three rounds of the NFL draft, including both starting tackles. The ability to find replacements who can step in right away and hold off rushers will determine much about the Irish's season because Book's likely replacement, grad transfer Jack Coan, is not much of a scrambler. But Coan is efficient. He completed 69.6% of his passes in 2019 at Wisconsin (before sitting out last year after injuring his foot).

BIG DAY *Sept. 25 vs. Wisconsin.* Coan's showdown with the Badgers will be the top story line when these teams meet at Soldier Field, but what really matters is that this early-season test will indicate whether this year is about contending or rebuilding. —M.K.

BIG NUMBER

42

Vertical leap, in inches, of junior safety Kyle Hamilton, a 6' 4", 219-pound All-America who led the Irish in tackles last season.

12

WASHINGTON

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 57TH DEFENSE 27TH FINAL AP POLL UNRANKED

BIG PICTURE Washington's 2020 season was especially abrupt. The Huskies started 3–1, good for first in the Pac-12 North, then had their remaining two games canceled due to COVID-19 and were unable to play in the conference title game because they couldn't field enough players. Washington has the talent to repeat as division champs, particularly if it can kick-start an offense that lagged behind a reliable defense.

BIG QUESTION Is Dylan Morris the answer at quarterback? Washington's offense scored more than 30 points just once last year. As a freshman, Morris was effective in the pocket but rarely took big shots, and completed just four of his 15 throws that went at least 20 yards beyond the line of scrimmage. Morris should be safe in the pocket again this year, thanks to an experienced offensive line led by junior left tackle **Jaxson Kirkland**, who allowed just one sack in 2020. If Morris falters, blue-chip freshman Sam Huard—whose uncle Brock was a Huskies star QB in the 1990s—could step into the starting role.

BIG DAY *Nov. 6 vs. Oregon.* Washington's schedule is favorable, with top conference foes—including the Ducks—all traveling to Seattle. —N.S.

BIG NUMBER

1.75

NCAA-leading sacks per game (seven in four games) last year by sophomore outside linebacker Zion Tupuola-Fetui, who ruptured his Achilles in April.

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 57TH DEFENSE 58TH FINAL AP POLL 18TH

13

NORTH CAROLINA

BIG PICTURE Talk about a turnaround. Three years ago the Tar Heels finished 2–9, and now they are coming off an 8–4 season featuring a New Year's Six bowl appearance, and they will be led by a serious Heisman candidate in junior QB **Sam Howell**.

BIG QUESTION How will Howell fare now that four of his favorite targets have left for the NFL? Running backs Michael Carter and Javonte Williams (each of whom caught 25 passes while rushing for more than 1,000 yards) and wide receivers Dyami Brown and Dazz Newsome (109 combined receptions) are all gone. Howell will welcome back one familiar face, though: senior Beau Corrales. The wide receiver looked ready to break out with a four-catch, 141-yard performance against Florida State on Oct. 17, but then a sports hernia ended his season. As for the ground game, Tennessee grad transfer Ty Chandler will help. He ran for 2,046 yards in his Vols career, averaging 4.9 yards per carry.

BIG DAY *Oct. 16 vs. Miami.* The key to reaching the ACC title game and a likely meeting with Clemson will be this matchup against the Canes, who will be motivated to avenge last year's 62–26 beatdown. —*Madeline Coleman*

BIG NUMBER

0

Heisman finalists in UNC history. The last Tar Heel to finish in the top 10 was running back Mike Voight, who was eighth in 1976.

14

INDIANA

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 94TH DEFENSE 43RD FINAL AP POLL 12TH

JASEN VINLOVE/USA TODAY SPORTS (HOWELL); VINCENT CARCHIETTA/USA TODAY SPORTS (PENIX)

BIG PICTURE As traditional conference powers struggled in 2020, Indiana rose up to beat Michigan, Michigan State and Penn State in the same season for the first time. Going 6–2 overall, the Hoosiers earned an Outback Bowl berth and the team's highest final ranking (12th) in 54 years.

BIG QUESTION Can **Michael Penix Jr.** stay healthy? The Hoosiers' redshirt junior quarterback has struggled with injuries throughout his career, suffering an ACL tear in 2018, a broken clavicle in '19 and another torn ACL (to the same right knee) last year. When Penix is healthy, he makes all the difference; he is 10–2 as a starter and enters '21 second in program history in career completion percentage (61.6%). The southpaw will be throwing to reigning Big Ten Receiver of the Year Ty Fryfogle, who opted to return for a fifth year instead of entering the NFL draft. Last year Fryfogle finished the shortened season with 721 yards and seven touchdowns on just 37 receptions.

BIG DAY *Oct. 23 vs. Ohio State.* The Hoosiers' lone Big Ten loss last season was to the Buckeyes, whom they haven't beaten since 1988. —L.B.

BIG NUMBER

3

Regular-season wins against top-25 teams for the Hoosiers last season, tied for second-most in the nation behind Alabama (4).

15

MIAMI

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 32ND DEFENSE 67TH FINAL AP POLL 22ND

BIG PICTURE Miami somehow went 8–3 last season despite myriad COVID-19 issues; in its 25–24 win against Virginia Tech, the Hurricanes were missing 13 players. Miami's season ended with a loss to Oklahoma State in the Cheez-It Bowl, a defeat that was compounded by the torn ACL suffered by **D'Eriq King**. The senior dual-threat quarterback is expected to be ready for the season opener.

BIG QUESTION Can the defense improve? It can't really be much worse than it looked at the end of 2020. Miami gave up a staggering 554 rushing yards in its regular-season finale, a 62–26 loss to North Carolina that kept the Hurricanes out of the New Year's Six mix. Coach Manny Diaz shook up his staff, hiring four new assistants and naming himself the defensive coordinator and play-caller. (He was the Canes' DC before taking over the head job in '19.) The defensive unit welcomes back nine starters, led by junior Bubba Bolden, a second-team all-conference safety.

BIG DAY *Sept. 4 vs. Alabama.* Will King be ready, and, if so, how sharp will he be? Miami opens the season in Atlanta against the reigning national champs, and the Tide's defense will provide the ultimate trial by fire. —M.C.

BIG NUMBER

11

Years (since UNLV in 2009) that a team gave up at least 550 yards rushing and 200 yards passing in a game before Miami did it against UNC.

DOUGLAS DEFELICE/USA TODAY SPORTS (KING); BRYON HOULGRAVE/THE REGISTER/USA TODAY NETWORK (LINDERBAUM)

16

IOWA

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 87TH DEFENSE 8TH FINAL AP POLL 16TH

BIG PICTURE The Hawkeyes missed out on a perfect season by seven points, going 6–2 and earning a berth in the Music City Bowl. Then again, Iowa didn't play a ranked team all year, and its bowl game against Missouri was canceled due to COVID-19.

BIG QUESTION Can the Hawkeyes continue to win their battles in the trenches? That has long been Iowa's calling card: The school has had 22 linemen from both sides of the ball (including tight ends) drafted since 2011, and that number will surely rise next year when junior center **Tyler Linderbaum** is eligible. The second-team All-America will anchor a line tasked with protecting junior QB Spencer Petras, who had a workmanlike first season as a starter (57.1% completion percentage with nine TDs and five interceptions). The defensive line is much more of a question mark, as Iowa lost tackle Daviyon Nixon (the Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year) as well as all-conference end Chauncey Golston to the NFL.

BIG DAY *Sept. 11 vs. Iowa State.* The Hawkeyes have played their in-state rivals 67 times since 1894, and never have both teams been ranked entering the game. That should change this year. —L.B.

BIG NUMBER

23

Seasons that Kirk Ferentz has helmed Iowa, making him the longest-tenured FBS head coach. The 66-year-old's record is 168–106.

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 49TH DEFENSE 62ND FINAL AP POLL UNRANKED

17

OREGON

BIG PICTURE Last season was strange for everyone, but especially for the Ducks. Despite going just 3–2 in regular-season conference play, they advanced to the Pac-12 title game after Washington got bounced due to COVID-19 issues. A win over USC sent Oregon to the Fiesta Bowl, where QB Tyler Shough, who started every game and led the conference in passing efficiency, got benched. (He transferred to Texas Tech after the season.) The vacancy will likely be filled by senior Anthony Brown, who threw for nearly 5,000 yards in three seasons at Boston College before transferring.

BIG QUESTION Can edge rusher **Kayvon Thibodeaux** become the first Duck to be drafted No. 1 since 1955? In 21 career games the nation's top recruit in the class of 2019 has 12 sacks (seven in the fourth quarter) and 23.5 tackles for loss. He had a ridiculous 23 QB pressures in his last three games of '20. He's one of eight starters back on a unit that was just 62nd in total defense.

BIG DAY *Sept. 11 at Ohio State.* If the Ducks hope to be the team that snaps the Pac-12's four-year College Football Playoff drought, they must prove themselves against this nonconference power. —N.S.

BIG NUMBER

-9

Oregon's turnover differential last year, which was tied for 119th in the nation. The Ducks recovered just two fumbles and had five INTs.

18

FLORIDA

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 9TH DEFENSE 83RD FINAL AP POLL 13TH

BIG PICTURE The Gators started the season 8–1 and had CFP aspirations. Then their defense fell apart, and Florida lost its regular-season finale 37–34 to LSU, the SEC title game 52–46 to Alabama and the Cotton Bowl 55–20 to Oklahoma. If the Gators need to outgun teams this year, they'll have to do it without QB Kyle Trask (4,283 yards), who is now with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. He will be replaced by junior Emory Jones, who can make big plays with his arm and his legs.

BIG QUESTION What is going on with the defense? Even before the late-season collapse, Florida's D was shaky, especially against the pass. The Gators ended up 100th in the country in yards allowed through the air (257.5 per game); it would have been worse if they didn't have lockdown corner **Kaiir Elam**. The junior has first-round talent, which he'll hone under Jules Montinar, one of two new coaches for the secondary. Transfers Antonio Valentino (Penn State) and Daquan Newkirk (Auburn) will help a line that had some trouble stopping the run and pressuring the QB.

BIG DAY *Sept. 18 vs. Alabama.* Florida will find out quickly whether its new-look D is better than last year's model. —K.W.

BIG NUMBER

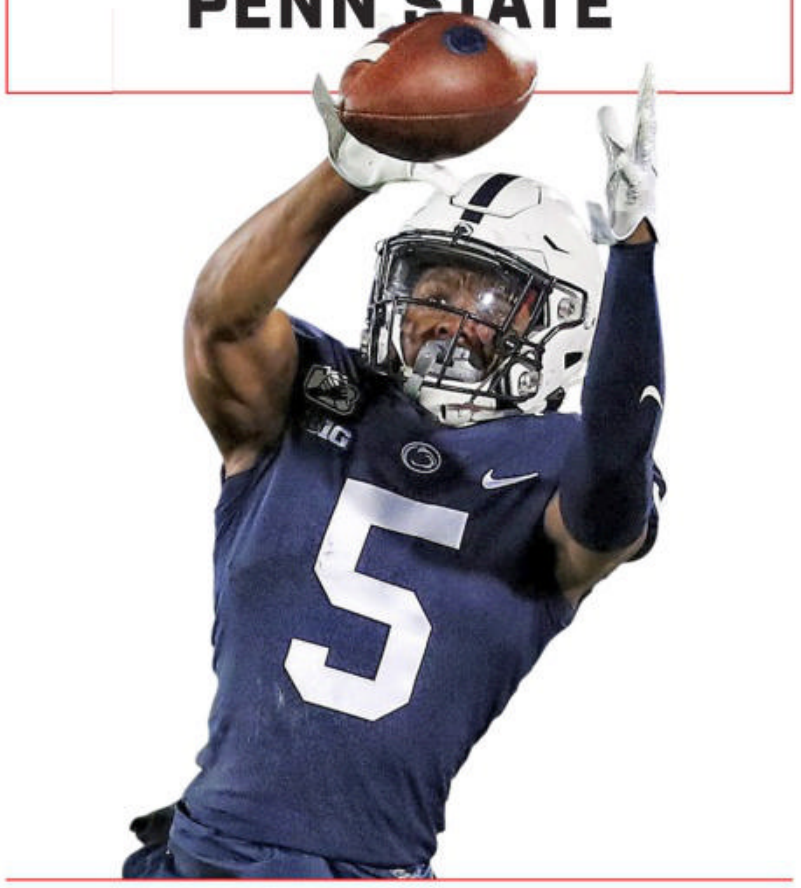
103

Years since the Gators gave up more points per game than they did in 2020, when they allowed an average of 30.8. That was 74th in the country.

BRIAN ROTHMULLER/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (THIBODEAUX); MARY HOLT/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (ELAM)

19

PENN STATE



2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 37TH DEFENSE 17TH FINAL AP POLL UNRANKED

BIG PICTURE Penn State began last season a top-10 team and went into Thanksgiving 0–5. The Nittany Lions did win their last four games, but none were against a ranked opponent. The hope in Happy Valley is that, like so many things in 2020, the season was a fluke.

BIG QUESTION Will the rushing game rebound? Things got off to a terrible start last year when Noah Cain, who set a school freshman record with eight rushing TDs in 2019, went down for the season with a left leg injury in the first series of Week 1. Penn State went on to average a meager 3.9 yards per carry, and the backfield's leader, true freshman Keyvone Lee, had just 438 yards rushing. Cain's return should help take some of the offensive load off of quarterback Sean Clifford, who had an erratic junior season, completing 60.6% of his passes with a conference-high nine interceptions. He got a boost when his favorite target, **Jahan Dotson**, opted to return for his senior year after averaging 17.0 yards per catch and scoring eight TDs in 2020.

BIG DAY *Sept. 4 at Wisconsin.* The Nittany Lions won't be easing into the season with any cupcakes this year. And on Sept. 18, Auburn comes to State College. —K.W.

BIG NUMBER

6

Consecutive games (the first five of last season and the previous year's Cotton Bowl) in which PSU gave up at least 30 points, a school record.

20

COASTAL CAROLINA

2020 RANKINGS OFFENSE 25TH DEFENSE 31ST FINAL AP POLL 14TH

BIG PICTURE In just their fourth season in FBS, the Chanticleers went 11–1 (8–0 in the Sun Belt), beat Zach Wilson–led BYU in a game dubbed "Mormons vs. Mullets" and finished the year ranked No. 14.

BIG QUESTION What can they do for an encore? With all but three starters returning, Coastal Carolina has a chance to be just as dangerous—but without the element of surprise. Jamey Chadwell, the 2020 AP Coach of the Year, has talent all over the field: Quarterback Grayson McCall was fifth in the nation in passer rating (184.3) as a redshirt freshman, with 26 touchdowns and three interceptions. He also rushed 111 times for 569 yards and seven touchdowns. Tight end **Isaiah Likely** averaged 20.0 yards on his 30 receptions, a remarkable total for a 6' 4" 245-pounder. Jaivon Heiligh had 998 yards receiving with 10 touchdowns. Cornerback D'Jordan Strong tied for third in the country with five interceptions. The biggest hole to fill was left by defensive end Tarron Jackson (8½ sacks), the Sun Belt's Defensive Player of the Year.

BIG DAY *Sept. 10 vs. Kansas.* The Jayhawks will be the first Power 5 opponent to play on the Surf Turf, the teal field installed at Brooks Stadium in 2015. —M.C.

BIG NUMBER

8

Starters (including specialists) who are super seniors, including sixth-year punter Charles Ouverson, who will graduate with four degrees.

MATTHEW OHAREN/USA TODAY SPORTS (DOTSON); SCOTT WINTERS/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES (LIKELY)

POINT AFTER

JAG CORE

Whenever he becomes Jacksonville's starting QB—maybe as soon as Week 1—we'll have an answer to one of the football world's biggest questions in 2021: How will Trevor Lawrence fare in the NFL? This season will also offer an answer to one of the football world's biggest questions in '07: How would Urban Meyer fare in the NFL? The former Florida and Ohio State coach, who retired in '18, is finally making his pro debut at age 57 after spending his entire career in the college ranks. The two NCAA legends have their work cut out, and not just because the Jags were 1–15 last year. It's been more than three decades since a rookie coach has won the Super Bowl, and a rookie QB has never been there.

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